



オーバーライト 2
— クリスマス・ウォーズの炎 —

Overwrite 2
The Proof of Christmas Wars

[illustration] みれあ

池 田 明 季 哉

電撃文庫

オーバーライト 2

—— クリスマス・ウォーズの炎 ——

池田明季 哉

(illustration) みれあ

Overnight
The Fox of Christmas Wars



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Prologue: “Teardrop”

Flames are made of heat and light. Carbon connects with oxygen, and carbon dioxide escapes into the air. It's the same with us humans. We breathe in and out. Oxygen comes in, and carbon dioxide comes out, which creates warmth inside of us. In that way, humans burn up every time they breathe. And as they can burn up...they eventually will burn out, too. One breath, one heartbeat, one moment passed—brings us closer to ash. What's left is to ask yourself one question. In this precious but limited time—How do you choose to burn up, and what light will you shine on this world?

On Christmas night—The world burned. Flames as far as the human eye could reach. This overwhelming force of violence engulfed everything in its way. Everything that possessed a shape falls to ruin. Flames of despair burn the skin, and raging light blinds the eyes. All life forms speak against its existence. Even the air is being controlled, forbidding you from breathing. In a way, it was a divine judgment that was put on us during this holy night.

And I—have to choose. The lion is cornered by red flames, shedding tears of fear. The fox spirit hides its body in the white smoke, smiling as it watches. And if I am unable to save everything...All life will burn up, one's soul turning to ash. Even if there is nothing but fire and flame in my view, I have to find it. That something inside this wavering world.

What awaits in the future—The path carved open by destiny—The hand promising tomorrow—That's right. I have to give my answer... in this brief moment of time. How I choose to burn up, and what light I will shine on this world.

Advertisement

Chapter 1: “Dissolved Girl”

Bristol Temple Meads Station, located to the south of the city center, was regarded as Bristol’s biggest railway station. All the way from London to the west here in Bristol, you can take the Great Western Railway. And the me of the present knows that the one who instructed this railway was also the same person who constructed the Clifton Suspension Bridge—Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

As Bristol flourished with its trade, they intended to make it grow even further and built the railway plus station. Additionally, Brunel was one of the most influential Engineers of the industrial revolution, so when he constructed this train station, he must have envisioned a dazzling future for Bristol. However, he surely would have never dreamed of the fact that after roughly 200 years, his beloved Bristol would be famous and holy ground for the odd and mysterious art known as graffiti. I also heard that more and more parts of the train station had fallen victim to the passage of time, which is why a lot of the areas he had built were now not in use anymore. In a way, this train station is being continuously overwritten, adjusting to Bristol’s development.

I got off the bus I had been on since my university’s dorm and looked up at the large clock tower. I still remember vividly when I first stepped outside this train station. The train that had GWR written on it was colored in typically UK-based colors like green and yellow. When I saw it come in at London’s Paddington Station, shaped beautifully with comforting colors like Japan’s bullet train, I knew that this baby was the real deal. But when I actually sat on it, it was astoundingly relaxing, and the further west I went, the more the surroundings outside the window changed into the countryside.

It takes about an hour and 45 minutes from London here. Arriving at this train station and its age yet odd polishment, I knew that something was different here. I was used to seeing more green from

the UK landscape here, but the refined culture and its scent really became apparent when I got off here. And, my premonition was on-point. It's been two months since I first arrived here. In the long history of this train station, it would be like blinking once. And even so, two things definitely changed.

First, there were decorations of red, green, and yellow. In the UK, the month of November also marked the beginning of the Christmas season. Even the people walking down the streets seemed a lot more gleeful than usual. As I figured, this *holiday* held a special meaning. And second, I actually came here to pick someone up for once. Up until not too long ago, I was a complete *stranger* to this land—a *visitor*. And yet, now, I'm a citizen of Bristol, making my way to the train station to pick up someone else. Normally, that would fill me with pride...that I had become a part of this land, but all of that vanished when I remembered the face of the person I was here to greet.

When I stepped inside the building, I heard a singing voice. And even though I knew this tone, my ears welcoming a familiar melody, I tried my hardest to pretend like I didn't. However, it was futile resistance. A crowd of people had gathered toward the voice. And I confirmed my suspicions to make my way there. Standing in the center of the mass of people was a street piano. Regarding its shape, it was like an upright piano, with colorful and adorable drawings filling its surface, which contradicted the stoic black ones I was used to. Here in the UK, you'd sometimes have street pianos set up, as people would play music. And watching this happen live in front of you created a feeling like you could even pull it off with a bit of trying, even open to the general public. That being said, that wouldn't work in this crowd...and I knew exactly why that was.

While playing the piano, she sang a song—Santa Claus is coming to town. Granted, her skill with the piano wasn't anything outstanding and kept fairly simple. But then why did she gather so many people? Simply because her singing voice was so alluring. The sound of it could very well be described as clear and transparent. There was no murkiness to be found, but it equally didn't break, either. It wasn't as fragile as a crystal ball, and rather sturdy like the large acrylic water tanks in an aquarium. It could handle any kind of pressure, not

suffering any fissures or breaks. It didn't matter if you were British or Japanese, one thing was clear to anybody.

That the girl's voice was truly a special *gift*. And there was only one person I knew who could create such a voice. While she continued her performance, I glanced at her profile. With each note, her expression changed, as her almond eyes stood out, especially because of the red makeup beneath, and her long eyelashes seemed so pompous they felt as if they had been artificially created. Despite her youthful singing voice, the chest that continued further down her neck was packed to the brim with mature charm. Each time her lips opened and moved, you'd think you were looking at a ferocious hunter about to leap at its prey. And as you keep staring at her sweet yet spicy appearance, dignified and frank atmosphere, pureness, and yet seductive nature, all of that combined into her charm that would make you feel dizzy.



Her singing voice and appearance were utterly breathtaking. And yet, each second I looked at her, I was simply shivering in terror. She continued to sing for a while when her eyes happened to catch me. Immediately after, she stopped her performance and dashed through the crowd of people, aiming directly for me.

“Yoshiii!”

That living being called out my name and jumped into my arms like a bullet. The impact almost had me stagger backward, but I somehow managed to keep myself standing.

“Santa-san is finally here! The wait was so long!”

She was speaking fluent Japanese. The fluent type I hadn't heard in a while.

“Actually the lyrics would mean that Nerlina is Santa...Oh well! Bristol, Nelina's here!”

Normally, that gaze of hers looking up at you could easily make your heart flutter, forcing you to fall apart at a single touch of hers. That's how charming she was. However, I'm different. I've been played and fooled by this lovable appearance so many times, my body remembers.

“I didn't expect you'd actually come, Nelina-san...”

I couldn't hide the exasperation in my voice. The reality that she was standing in front of me...was something I didn't want to accept.

“But Nelina said she's not gonna wait, right?”

I held my head. A while after she texted me ‘Not gonna wait’, the very next message was ‘At the station.’ I don't know where she gets off thinking that this was perfectly normal behavior. She took this as lightly as heading to a friend's house a few train stops over. Even the flight alone takes 12 hours straight, being around 12,000 kilometers, so this isn't anything to do on a whim. In fact, I'd like to be praised for putting the facts together with just this much to work with...or rather, I deserved to be praised for that, but she wasn't the type of person for minute thoughts like that. I knew that better than anybody else.

Because this is Nelina we're talking about. Even if we played in a band together in Japan, her attitude didn't change one bit after coming to Bristol. Her voice was alluring as always, her figure enticing, and a moment's relaxation will lead to a lifetime of service. It's like being deceived by a fox.

“And what would you have done if I hadn’t come here to pick you up?”

“Nelina just knew. Just as you knew that Nelina would come here. Right? Perfect.”

“Nothing is perfect here,” I sighed. “Why have you come here...”

“Enough about that! Nelina’s hungry, and Bristol has some delicious food, right? Show Nelina around!” She took my hand, waving it up and down like a child.

Looking around, the crowd had already dispersed. Nobody had expected the performance to end this way, I bet. If possible, I’d love to join them and just pretend as if none of this happened.

“Right now, I truly wish I hadn’t come here. Maybe I should just leave you here.”

“Then do that?”

Hearing her blunt response, I subconsciously turned my gaze toward her. However, that was her usual act. Her eyes pierced through me like they could see what I felt deep inside, as her lips formed a cunning smile.

“Yeah, there’s no way you’d leave Nelina behind, right?”

I struggled to respond. She knew too well. That if she were to come to Bristol, I’d have to pick her up. And also, that I couldn’t leave her alone here in this town where she didn’t know left from right. This is how things always end up with Nelina in front of me. I try to fight against it, only to play along to her tune.

“Which bus should we take? C’mon, hurry up!”

I looked up at the sky, indulging in its clear blue color as a cold gust of wind hit me. This world is connected. The same sky that towers over Bristol can be seen in Japan. And for the first time ever, I cursed that.

*

“Oh, wow. The buses here aren’t too different from the ones in Japan, huh?”

We hopped on the bus, to which Nelina looked around like an excited child. The famous two-floor red London buses that were like a cultural sight for the UK only drove around in London, so if you came all the way out here to Bristol, you’d see the regular ones. And just as Nelina stated, they didn’t differ much from the ones you’d see in Japan. The only difference is that there was a larger space for passengers to place their luggage and such. And as you’d expect, I was responsible for pushing around her large suitcase. I had her sit down before me, paid for two tickets with my card, stuffed her suitcase in the back, and then sat down next to her.

“You can pay me back the money for the ticket later.”

“It’s not euros here, right? Pound, was it?”

“I’m shocked you managed to make it here while being this clueless...”

“One way or another, Nelina made it here!”

Really, how did she manage that? Going from the airport to London, and then taking the train from Paddington station should involve several payments at least. Granted, a credit card could handle most of that, but if she’s this oblivious, then it’s nothing short of a miracle that she got here in one piece. It just works out with her...which, in a way, is what makes her, her.

“And what were you up to in Bristol, Yoshi?”

“Well...”

I explained most of the details to Nelina during my message, but I still repeated it now in person. What led me to come to Bristol, how I encountered graffiti and its culture, the purge of the Bearpit, the actions of the writers, and the fact that graffiti made a glorious return by the end.

“Mhm, Nelina doesn’t really get it, but those drawings were turned into something beautiful, right? Good enough.” Nelina pouted as she leaned against the back of her seat.

She was the one who asked, and yet had the gall to ask. Then again, that was nothing new, and complaining about it won’t change a thing.

“Were you listening to me? Those aren’t drawings, it’s graffiti, and...”

“Why are you getting so passionate about this graffiti stuff, Yoshi?”

Met with this sharp question, I was unable to respond. I haven’t told Nelina about Boudicia yet. I said I met the writer they call the Ghost of Bristol, but I didn’t touch upon the fact that we are colleagues at work, or that we were greatly involved with the incident at the Bearpit. It’s not something that needs hiding or anything. But, I just hadn’t fully clarified with myself how I should tell her.

“Listen, none of that matters right now. What Nelina wants to ask is...” Nelina stabbed me where it hurt as I couldn’t even finish my words.

However, before she could continue, the bus stopped and we were rocked left and right. As she got off the bus, her step was light like a dancer’s, as I struggled to pull her suitcase after me. I pretended to not hear the scream of terror as the suitcase slammed against the stone pavement.

“I’ve gotta head to my job after this. Where are you staying, Nelina-san?”

“Where...At your place, of course.”

What is she talking about?

“That won’t do. I’m staying at a student dorm, and I also only have one bed...”

“But that’s more than enough, right?”

“...Huh?”

“A bed’s better than anything we have at the studio. You’re gonna play the guitar until Nelina’s fallen asleep, yes?”

At first, I sighed in relief because that’s what she meant, but felt anger boiling inside of me at the fact that this treatment wasn’t any different than in Japan.

“You just slept while I was busy recording, don’t you remember?”

“But a lack of sleep is the mortal enemy of beauty.”

“At least make it the enemy of music, okay?”

“Beauty is just as important. Aren’t you happy when Nelina looks all glossy, Yoshi?”

“Not at all. Though I bet your fans would agree.”

Nelina wasn’t selling herself as an idol or anything. The reason she was popular with both men and women is that she swiftly adjusted her attitude depending on who she was dealing with. Being able to act this way in such a perfect display was also one of her abilities, and what allowed her to play with the hearts of others.

“You say that, but you’re Nelina’s number one fan, right?”

There’s no end to this. I tried to pull the suitcase after me, but it got stuck on the stone pavement. Raising it up was a pain, but the only way.

“Anyway! Find yourself a place to stay right now. There are hotels, and you can even book them online, so you should find one even today...”

“Not happening.”

“Why?”

“Nelina doesn’t understand English.”

For a second, I was absolutely bewildered.

“Huh? But you were just singing, right? Santa Claus is coming to town...and in English, no less.”

“Singing is one thing, but Nelina doesn’t understand the meaning one bit.”

She’s able to sing it just fine without understanding what any of it means...In a way, this is just another side of her talent, and I had to accept that.

“...Fine. I’ll reserve something for you, so maybe look around town until my shift at work is done...”

“Waaaah, no way! So scary! What if something happens?! Nelina’s coming with you!”

Her voice may sound as sweet as honey, but also adhesive like glue, always making the people in her close vicinity act for her own sake. Thanks to that, I went through hell and back more times than I can count. And yet, I couldn’t cover my ears and distance myself because her voice was, as much as it annoyed me, utterly beautiful.

*

In the end, we came to the 8-Bit World while I dragged the suitcase after me. As you’d expect, the UK stone pavement wasn’t made for large suitcases like these. But I can imagine how they handle it—they probably had slaves just like me who suffered through it. Or maybe I’m the only one who’s resenting this, and everybody else happily accepted. Either way, my head was full of this heavy luggage...That’s why I just opened the familiar door of the shop without even considering what could happen from now on.

“Oh, you’re here!”

As soon as I opened the door, Boudicia came jumping at me like those jack-in-the-box jumpscare toys. In her hand, she had a sketchbook.

“Hey, Yoshi. I was coming up with some new stuff I could write and...”

She stopped herself mid-sentence, as her gaze wandered from my face to the suitcase I had behind me, then moved toward Nelina, who stood next to me. And it didn't take too long for her expression to change into something akin to fury.

"Yoshi, who's that woman?"

By spending time with her, there is one thing I learned. If you wanted to spend time in the same cage as this lion, you had to become extremely proficient at reading her emotions. And this...was the worst possible tone imaginable.

"No, well, um, there's a good reason for this..."

I didn't know how to properly explain myself, fumbling over my own words. I mean, this good reason isn't something I fully understand myself, but...Nelina must have felt the animosity coming from Boudicia, as she looked at me in disbelief, and then quickly hid behind me.

"Nooo, this person is scary! Save me, Yoshi!"

Why does she need to say everything in such a sweet voice? It'll only make things worse—

"Huh? What? The hell is this *fox*? Yoshi, you don't know that wench, right? Right? Because if you do, I'll make sure to slam you down Clifton Suspension Bridge."

Meanwhile, Boudicia was burning up to the point I could feel my skin turning black.

"Honestly, I regret having her as an acquaintance..."

"Whaaat? It sure feels like she's bad-mouthing Nelina! Go tell her, Yoshi!"

"What was that? Japanese? We're in the UK, you dimwit. You Japanese people should...Wait, Japanese? Are you that vocalist?"

"Ah, she just said vocalist, right? Yes, of course. Can't you tell with my absolutely charming voice?"

“I see, I see. So it’s you. I’ll skin you alive and hang you up as a trophy, then.”

Boudicia knows. She knows that because of my band’s vocalist and her words, I ended up with severe trauma that left me unable to play the guitar. And at the same time, it’s thanks to Boudicia that I became able to play again. Seeing her this angry did make me feel happy to some degree, but when I realized that I should be the one who should be most furious, I started to feel pathetic. And as sparks flew between the two, Nelina’s gaze wandered toward the sketchbook in Boudicia’s hands.

“Ah, right, right. That makes sense. You’re that person drawing the art or whatever, right? What a shame, but Yoshi prefers Nelina’s singing much more than your weird doodles!”

“...She just laughed, didn’t she. She laughed at my graffiti, right?”

“Huuuh? If you’ve got something to say, then say it in Japanese. Why would Yoshi have to match your preference and speak in English? Makes no sense.”

“I haven’t got a single clue what she’s even saying. But I fully understand that I should kick you out of here right now!”

I held my head once again. One is speaking English, the other is speaking Japanese. Despite their words not being conveyed at all, only their hostility towards each other is clear as day. Some things in this world are meant to never get in contact. Water and oil. A dog and an ape. Chlorine-based soap and acidic liquid—A lion and a fox. And yet, I was caught right in the middle between them. What bad fortune this was.

If only I had anticipated that this would happen if I put them into the same space, things wouldn’t have escalated this much. I think Nelina’s sudden arrival just threw me off course that much. Honestly, I kinda wished this was some hallucination or even a nightmare.

“What is going on out here, Boo-chan, Yoshi-kun?”

With all this ruckus, Manager Radesh showed up from the back of the

store. Hearing his gentle and peaceful tone only fueled my guilt even further. That's right, we were still inside his store right now.

"Radesh, ain't that obvious? I'm on a *fox hunt*."

"But that's not something you should be doing inside my store. Aren't you a *naughty* one, Boo-chan."

"Oh, zip it!"

"Scary, scary. So, Yoshi-kun, who's this girl?"

"Ah, well..."

I couldn't help but admire Radesh's ability to silence Boudicia with a single word, as I explained the circumstances.

"Hmm, I see."

After listening to my brief explanation, he came up with an unexpected idea.

"Why not entrust her to Aeon-kun, then? He should be able to understand a bit of Japanese, no?"

"But didn't he go on a trip to Japan just the other day?"

"He'll depart in three days, so this should be perfect. She could teach him some of Japan's popular spots, too."

Aeon deeply fell in love with the idea of Zen, so he regularly visits Japan. However, I wasn't too sure if Aeon and Nelina were that good of a mix.

"Sorry about all this trouble..."

"Now, now. Your good friend has come to Bristol, so we have to welcome her. And she must be feeling worried because she's only got you to talk to."

"Hey, Yoshi. This person is pretty nice, right? Nelina can tell!"

"You should probably just be quiet for a while..."

I explained where Aeon's store was, as Radesh showed her his phone. I considered sending her off, but since my shift was coming up...and even more so because I needed a break from her, I decided to have her go there alone. I needed some time to get my thoughts in order. Nelina seemed a bit confused at Radesh's explanation, but she should be able to read a map, at the very least. Or so I hoped.

"See you later, Yoshi! Surely, you'll be lonely without Nelina around, but do your best!"

The fact that her blowing a kiss at me didn't physically hurt was probably due to her talent, as well. And as she stepped out of the store, her hair glittering from the sunlight, Boudicia gave her one last comment.

"Stop by again! I'll have my *shotgun* ready for you, then!"

In any other country, you'd be letting this one slip, but Boudicia's sarcasm was very much UK-style. And when I saw Nelina turn around to stick out her tongue, I realized that they were both just the same as always. At the same time, Radesh didn't seem bothered at all and just returned to the back of the store. Meanwhile, Boudicia let out a snort and sat down on the plastic chair, who screamed in pain and terror at the force she used.

I looked at her face, which didn't make any attempt at hiding how displeased she was. When I first met her, I was utterly baffled at the beauty she possessed. And even her ferocious attitude didn't lay waste to her looks, but the impression she gave me did change greatly. All the expressions I had seen from her up to this point overlapped, making her feel much more three-dimensional. This must mean that, to me, Boudicia has become an existence I had slowly grown accustomed to. But that's also why...I wanted to discuss this with her.

"Um, Boo-san."

"Listen, Yoshi."

But right as I made up my mind and called out to her, she did the exact same.

“Ah, um, go ahead.”

“...Nah, forget it.”

I apologized in the heat of the moment, but it appeared as if it was already too late. While sitting at the cash register, Boudicia rested her head on one hand and looked away. Was there something she wanted to tell me? Even if that was the case, I couldn't immediately think of anything. After all, she's the type to immediately say if anything's on her mind. Like, “Let's go eat lunch” or “Tell me what you think about my new graffiti” and so on...Is it just me or is she pushing me around like a lackey? Whatever the reason, it's rare for her to be this tongue-tied.

“*Oh dear.*”

As I was lost in thought, I heard a high voice fill the store. Two tails of hair shook as the light entering through the window illuminated their bluish-green color.

“Welcome, Lara-san.”

She seemed to have caught on to the stiff atmosphere, as she looked around with a dubious gaze.

“What's going on here? I just happened to run into a Japanese person right outside. Is this related or something?”

“Good guess. *Fox fur, made in Japan.*”

“Hm, I get what's going on. Yoshi, *I am sorry.*”

“I humbly thank you for your kind words...”

Our exchange felt the same as usual, but it almost looked like a shadow lived on her face.

“Well, none of that matters right now. Boo, have you seen this?”

“What's it now?”

Lara made her way over to the cash register, showing Boudicia

something on her phone. I also glanced at it over Boudicia's shoulder. On the screen, I could see something that looked like a picture uploaded to social media. Someone had written graffiti on the shutter of a store.

"The bookstore at St George's Road, right? That's some lame graffiti, though. Some lazy ass tag like that isn't worth a damn thing nowadays."

I could tell that the graffiti wasn't too complicated or well executed. It even looked closer to being some sort of prank graffiti. However, what really attracted my attention was something else. There was a middle-aged man looking at the shutter. His expression contained a wide arrangement of expression. Sadness, anger, but also... exasperation—all of them blending together. I couldn't tell what exactly he felt, but with the graffiti in front of him, he must be shocked at least.

"Look at this." Lara pointed at the comment added to the picture.

Written there, it said—*Harm saves no one*. And if I had to guess, harm must be referring to the graffiti.

"It was uploaded this morning, and it's gotten a lot of *comments*, too. And all of them show disdain toward the graffiti.

Honestly, I thought it was a great picture. It told more than reality itself. Everybody would sympathize with the man, as he looked at the graffiti in shock. I personally have become very attached to the idea of graffiti, but some people still cause pain and trouble like this nonetheless. I understood what some of the comments had to say, too.

"Who uploaded this?" Boudicia asked, leaning against the chair, not showing much interest at all.

"Gabriel. The Musician of Bristol."

"Huh?" Lara's words had me audibly gasping.

"Yoshi, you know him?"

“Well, yes.”

“He’s quite famous in the world of music, after all. But, he absolutely despises graffiti. And lately, he’d upload pictures like these.”

He...hates graffiti. When I heard that, I covered my mouth and started thinking.

“Musicians usually are into graffiti, right? Do people like him actually exist?” Boudicia’s doubt was perfectly reasonable.

Bristol’s graffiti was closely connected to its music. Even the walls of concert houses had large murals drawn on them by liked artists. And many artists are involved in both music and graffiti at the same time. Dealing with a musician who actively despised graffiti here in Bristol must be quite a rarity.

“Of course. Right here.” Lara tapped on the phone screen with her flashy nails, answering Boudicia’s answer. “I don’t know if it’s because of Gabriel’s influence, but lately, the atmosphere’s changed. The city council’s been quiet since that last incident, but some citizens still don’t like the idea of graffiti nonetheless. And I’m aware that not all graffiti is correct and deserves to exist. The citizens have the right to judge our art. But...I don’t like this at all.”

The purge of the Bearpit was instigated by the city council, and pushed further by George behind the scenes, but the distrust toward graffiti and its writers still stood by the citizens no less. If so...

“If this opposition grows, then the city council will move again...do you mean?”

“That would be something we could at least deal with to some degree...”

“Heh, if they pick a fight, we fight back. Easy as that.”

“You’re such a simpleton...But that’s also what I like about you!”

“Wah, l-let go!”

Lara leaped over the counter to cling to Boudicia, burying her face in

her chest. At first, Boudicia was extremely aggressive and bothered by Lara's affectionate attitude, but now that some time has passed, I can see that she opened up a lot more, which was a relieving sight. And after enjoying Boudicia for a bit longer, Lara left the store again. She said she'd be on the lookout to make sure the opposition against graffiti didn't grow any stronger.

"Now then."

"What?"

"It's time to work."

Nelina may have gotten in my way, and Lara brought up an interesting story, but that left it with all the work still undone.

"Mmm, *later*."

So Boudicia said, but I was painfully aware that she didn't mean it in the literal sense of doing it later. However, I wasn't in the mood for another argument. The only thing on my mind was that Boudicia looked oddly melancholic since that time she was about to say something.

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By the time all my work was done, the sun had begun to set outside. Because of Bristol's position on the globe, the length of days could vary quite a lot simply depending on the season. Once winter rolls around, the sky would turn dark already in the early evening. After not doing any helping the whole day, Boudicia yawned loudly and stretched her arms, which once again reminded me of a cat. We locked up the store and then started making our way down south on Rupert Street.

The city was already drenched in a Christmas atmosphere. The street lamps had decorations hung on and around them, and the various shop windows of the street were filled with Christmas trees. All of the town felt excited about the upcoming holidays. Compared to Japan's snow-white lights and illuminations, the UK felt a lot darker. However, the orange colors everywhere created a warm and inviting

sensation.

“Almost Christmas, huh.”

As she uttered these words, Boudicia’s profile had a heart rending look on her face, making my chest tighten up. However, she quickly returned to her usual expression.

“You guys in Japan have Christmas, too?”

Not wanting to overstep any boundaries, I just answered her question.

“We sure do.”

“Oh, huh. So it’s not all Buddhism over there.”

“Explaining that will turn complicated, but I suggest you ask Aeon-san for the details, he’ll probably explain it in easier terms...That being said, Christmas is probably the second biggest holiday after *New Year’s*.”

“Hmm...So I guess you spend it with your family?”

“That’s mostly the case for New Year’s, but Christmas is usually spent with a partner or so on.”

“I see. Then, what about you? What did you...do last year?”

I thought about it for a moment. And then I opened the door to a painful memory I’d rather forgotten, which made my face stiffen. That’s right, last year was...

“...I was with Nelina-san. She calls you over wherever and whenever, even on *holidays*. Thanks to that, I was stuck in the radio recording all day.”

“It’s rare to see you complain about something, I gotta say.”

“You’ve met her, haven’t you? That person will make you want to throw complaints around.”

Boudicia listened to my statement and went quiet again. Something's off, after all.

"That reminds me, wasn't there something you wanted to tell me earlier?"

"...It's nothing. And what about you? I interrupted you, right?"

"I..."

In the end, I had to tell her. But because of what we discussed earlier, I was now hesitating. And then, as if my mind had been read, my smartphone made a notification sound. Normally, I'd leave this alone, but just this once, it felt like a saving grace, so I looked down at it. The notification came from a message that Lara had sent me. All it said was "Lower Ram Street." That's all it said...But I knew what exactly that was referring to.

"Geez, we were in the middle of a conversation here. If it's from that fox, I'll push her down Cabot Tower."

"Boo-san, this is..."

"...Tsk!"

I showed Boudicia the screen, to which she clicked her tongue and started running. I followed after her. That's right, she knew. Going down Rupert Street and then taking the turn into Anchor Road, we entered a narrow side street. Two brick walls stand at both sides, as a path continues all the way until a dead end. It was the place where Boudicia had written her first genuine with her left hand—Or at least, it should have been there.

"This is..."

At first, I thought it was a flash of lightning. It went in a straight line, sharply turned, and then twisted up. And this lightning now sliced through Boudicia's graffiti. Of course, it wasn't possible to slice through graffiti written on the wall, but the important part of this sight—was that Boudicia's graffiti was being erased. Like someone had run an eraser along the wall right through the graffiti, revealing the brick stone underneath. There was nothing written on it. It was

simply being erased. Erasing parts of Boudicia's graffiti. Would this also count as an overwrite?

"So you're here." Lara stood on the stairs facing the wall.

"Hey, what's this about?"

"That's what I want to know. I spotted it while patrolling the area."

"...Reverse graffiti, huh? Damn bastards." Boudicia placed her hand on the part of the graffiti that was erased and inspected it.

"Is this also a type of graffiti?"

"Graffiti's written with spray paint, remember? But you can remove it with a high-pressure washer, writing something new in return."

"I see. That's why you call it a *reverse* one."

That explained a lot. You erase something to write something new. It sounds quite unorthodox, but it's one option, one type of graffiti.

"It often happens that you see graffiti being removed like this...but using this method to overwrite is a first for me."

"This is supposed to be an overwrite? Don't make me laugh. Normally you practice the alphabet in the *nursery*."

"Alphabet..."

I looked at erased parts of the graffiti once more—[Z]. That's the letter I could make out. If this was like any other graffiti, it might contain some sort of message. It's the last letter of the alphabet. The end...But to what? Maybe...Graffiti as a whole?

"Boo, what are you going to do now?" Lara's question pulled me out of my thoughts.

"What do you mean?"

"This seems like a tough one to crack."

"...I know."

That response filled my head with doubt.

“Is it really that big of an issue? It doesn’t seem like something that’s complicated to surpass, so can’t you simply overwrite it again?”

The rule of overwriting says that the new work has to be either more complicated and time expensive or show a higher level of quality than the previous one. That is the unwritten law of graffiti, taught to me by Aeon himself. However, this reverse graffiti does not seem more complicated or even genuinely better than Boudicia’s graffiti. The previous one had so much more vigor and life to it.

“It’s the opposite. It required next to no effort. Would Boo writing another graffiti over it really count as a victory?”

Lara’s words made something click in my mind. This reverse graffiti does not adhere to the regular rules. As such, it was idiotic to even be bothered by worrying about effort or quality. But that’s exactly why a fight outside the regular playing field was a waste for all parties involved. If the next graffiti ends up erased yet again, there’s nothing to gain. If you’re going to overwrite, you need something that surpasses the norm.

“No matter how you twist it, this isn’t a case where the term overwrite applies. It’s plain and simple *disrespect*. I can feel clear animosity, too. A wild guess would be that they knew it was the Ghost’s work and purposefully chose this act.”

After the incident at the art museum, talk of the Ghost of Bristol has made the rounds, and everybody in the writer world knew of it. Naturally, the same goes for the signature in the shape of a ghost. And Boudicia has become active slowly but surely since then. However, she was still on the path of recovery, let alone overwriting, she was building up her skill from zero and worked on tags or slow-ups. In fact, rather than writing on walls, she’s been facing her sketchbook more than anything else. And with these few works, assumptions about the identity of the Ghost have been spiraling all over.

The Ghost is a robust man. Maybe an innocent child. A famous musician. A renowned beauty...And while the last one’s pretty close

to the truth, these rumors have made the rounds. Of course, a few selected graffiti writers know the Ghost's identity, but they were keeping this fact a secret. That's why you could say that this graffiti here on this wall was one of the few genuine works of the Ghost. And just as Lara said, the other person must have been aware of this fact, so erasing it like this was nothing short of a challenge directed at the Ghost.

"Be careful, okay? ...Boo, is something wrong?"

Boudicia must have been thinking about the person behind this just as I did, but after Lara called out to her, she sighed once and stopped glaring at the graffiti.

"Nah, it's all okay."

"If you say so...Well, contact me if anything comes up," Lara said as she headed up the stairs and left the scene.

Now it was just me, Boudicia, and the raptured graffiti.

"...Boo-san, what were you thinking about?"

I asked her, as she still had her arms crossed.

"Mm..." She hesitated for a moment and then opened her mouth. "Sure, I could just overwrite it. But...when I saw it, my head felt dizzy, and my chest tightened up."

I patiently waited for her to continue.

"Seems like I wanted it to remain there a bit longer. It's an important memory, since it was the first graffiti I wrote with my left hand. And...you were with me, too."

"You can write something better, I'm sure."

"I wonder about that."

I tried to cheer her up, but the reason it turned into something so half-baked is that something struck me as odd. **Because...I was there?**

"It's weird, right? So far, I never even thought about stuff like that." Boudicia stuffed her hands into the pockets of her red hoodie.

I wonder...how aware she even was about the words she had said just now.

"Well, anyway. Just writing something new ain't good enough, and I wouldn't know what to write either...Let's just go home," she said and turned her back toward the wall, walking away on heavy stomps...which pulled at my heartstrings.

I try to always be discrete and deliberate. That's why I don't like to work with hypotheticals and what-ifs. But...the reason why looking at her graffiti like this makes her chest hurt...and the reason why she even wrote this graffiti with her left hand...If there is even the slightest possibility that I am even a tiny fragment of this whole reason, like a tiny drop of ink falling into a large pool of water, then...

"Um, Boo-san."

"Hm?" She turned around.

Her blonde ponytail and earring shook as she did so. If there's even the smallest thing I can do to clear up the vague shadow falling over her usual sharp gaze, then—

"...I'll find [Z] no matter what."

"You..."

"And then, I'll make them apologize to you."

At first, she looked at me in doubt, only to burst out laughing.

"Hah! Not like them doing that would make me any happier."

I realized what I'd just said and internally groaned in embarrassment.

"R-Right. That's also true. Sorry for saying something *weird* like that."

"Now you're gonna be the *Graffiti Detective*? Don't overdo it, 'kay?"

Boudicia walked toward me, gently bumped her shoulder into mine, and turned around again.

While I rubbed my shoulder, I looked after her. We first met here in this very place, without even knowing of each other's existence. She planned to erase her graffiti and then leave Bristol. And if Boudicia's future once again was on the line during this very incident—then I wanted to be of help to her.

Advertisement

Chapter 2: “A Prayer for England”

“Welcome to [The Ark]. You are Yoshi, *aren’t you?*” He said and opened his arms wide.

With the bright light of the stage in front of me, I had to narrow my eyes. I was like a believer being invited into the church by its priest. Or, it could be compared to an angel whispering into the ears of a praying artist. Maybe even a pigeon that came down from the heavens as it was showered in light—These ideas overlapped at this precise moment. However, I wasn’t given any time to bask in this feeling. Because the man was carrying a guitar case on his back, with none other than Nelina clinging to his arm.

*

Let’s rewind time a bit. The day after we encountered the work of [Z] for the first time, I was once again working at 8-Bit World. Since Christmas slowly closed in on us, a game shop like ours was fairly busy. I had my hands full interacting with the customers, and even our resident seat warmer Boudicia was busy taking care of the cash register. And since we’d worked together a whole lot up to this point, I realized that she’s actually pretty popular with the customers. She’s not exactly friendly, but she manages to figure out exactly what the people want. The cheeky children are especially super friendly when Boudicia is involved. Of course, when there’s specific knowledge needed, she usually calls for me, but it’s better than pretending or giving bad advice.

In reality, I should really be talking to Boudicia. During today, at least. However, as I was struggling to get used to the special Christmas wrapping, she had already finished her shift and left the store, leaving me no chance to say anything. I mean...if I really

attempted anything, I might have found a chance. But I just wasn't prepared enough...or rather, I lacked determination. And on my way home, as I cursed my negligence, a familiar shadow leaped at me when I arrived at the Manor Hall gate.

"You're laaate!"

"Huh? Nelina-san? What are you doing here?"

"You live here, right? Nelina heard about that!"

Must have been Aeon. I cursed my own carelessness. She can't even speak the language, and yet she came to visit her male friend overseas. If I was asked about that situation, I would have told her the location, too. It's proper etiquette. And that would have been fine...if it wasn't Nelina. No, thinking about it, not even Nelina should be that big of a problem...right?

"He set up a place for you to stay, right? Aeon-san, I mean."

"Yes, Aeon! He's so cool! Nelina really likes clever but kind and yet muscly men like him! And he can even speak a bit of Japanese! It's so hype!"

"Good, good. Anyway, I'm busy."

Looking at things, she managed to secure a place she could stay, which was just perfect for me. Because now I don't need to look after her in my own room. I slipped past Elina, opened the door to the dorm using my student ID, waited for the lock to open on the wooden door, and then entered.

"Heeey! Nelina was waiting for you this whole time!"

If I listen to her even once, she'll stick to me like glue. And then it'll be morning and I will have had no sleep.

"But Nelina came here just for you!"

"I didn't ask you for that."

"And yet, you came to pick up Nelina!"

“Because I saw no other choice.”

“You say that, but your body is honest!”

“Can you not phrase things weirdly?!”

I wasn't saying I was busy just as a pretense. It's the truth. It was an important day, and although I felt bad for Nelina, I had to focus on what was ahead of me.

“I really can't today. I just came to grab some stuff and then leave again.”

“Hmmm? What stuff?”

“Doesn't have anything to do with you.”

I chose to not answer. I didn't want to share any information with her. And I did my best to not meet eyes with Nelina as I walked up the stairs, opening the doors to walk down the hallway. Finally, I reached my room and opened it with my key—Wait, with my key?

“So this is your room? Not half bad, Yoshi!”

“Gaaaaaah?! ”

I cursed my own carelessness yet again. As I thought, I was not rational enough whenever Nelina was involved. I cannot break free from her. She waltzed into my room like it was the hotel room she reserved and then jumped onto my bed. She even changed into my slippers, too. This is what they mean when the world is your plaything, huh?

They say you should do in Rome as the Romans do, but I couldn't fight the tradition that was burned into me, so I would always take off my shoes in my own room. And since I don't expect people to come by, I only have one pair of slippers. I sighed while I took off my own shoes and entered my own room while only wearing socks.

“So, where are you going? There can't be anything more important than spending time with Nelina, right?” She flapped her legs and down while on my own bed, whispering like the devil's temptation.

However, I cannot tell her. Especially not today, that's for sure.

"That's the case for a lot of things in this world. So, please, won't you leave? I'm going to head out myself in a moment, too." I put my guitar case on my back, packing the effector units into a separate bag that I carried.

That's right. Today is an important day.

"Hmmm, oh, is that so."

Seeing this, Nelina's voice sounded cold and judgmental for a moment, and I could clearly hear that.

"Okay. Nelina will leave."

"Thank you for understanding." I sighed in relief.

She's a musician like me, and she must know how important it is to me when I look like this.

"And Nelina will come with you."

"You don't understand a thing! No way."

"Should you really be saying that, Yoshi? If you don't take me with you, I'll just stay here."

"Then do that. It's better than having you come with me."

I don't have a choice but to bring her with me. However, I also can't afford to escort her back to where she stays. I'm more than just worried to leave her in my own room, but it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make.

"Nelina will make sure to wait for you naked, so hurry home, okay?"

"Nevermind, please do leave after all."

Seeing Nelina snuggle under my blanket gave me a severe headache. Even the thought of just jumping out of the window to run crossed my mind for a moment.

"Might as well take a selfie while doing that and show it to that girl tomorrow. Aaah, so embarrassing! What's her name again? That nasty doodle stray cat."

"Boo-san...Do you mean Boudicia-san?"

"That's her name? My, it sounds so fitting. So simplistic."

That's just nasty. If the person in question heard that, they might just beat each other to death. But, I had to think about it now. Today is an important day for me. Probably just as important as the day Boudicia wrote the graffiti with her left hand. Because of that injury on her right arm, she couldn't write anymore. And the reason I couldn't play the guitar anymore...for some reason was lying in my own bed right now. Why did she have to come to Bristol now of all times? But...maybe this is just perfect.

"...I understand. I don't like to yield, but let's go."

"See, that's the spirit! Yoshi, you're always kind when it comes to Nelina! But wait, did Nelina just pass up on a crazy chance? Maybe she should have waited for you naked...Oh well, we can just do that after we get home! Gosh, Nelina is so greedy!"

"I will definitely drop you off at the inn once we get home."

Soon enough, we were already outside my room, and I locked the door while listening to Nelina's lines. Shortly after, we left the dorm, too. Nelina didn't ask where we were going. Despite being like this, she could be extremely sharp at times. She probably figured out everything the second she saw me grabbing my 'stuff.' As I was making my way to my destination in silence, Nelina skipped after me. The Bristol streets at night were dark. I'm glad I didn't send her home alone, after all, because if something were to happen to her, I would definitely feel bad.

"Hey, Yoshi. Are these drawings, too?"

Nelina stopped in front of a wall as she twirled around once, pointing at a certain part. On there was a roughly-written tag with spray. It's pretty much like random doodles, yeah.

“It’s not just that. It’s graffiti.”

Even so, what Nelina said ticked me off, so I returned the favor.

“It’s just random drawings.”

“But the real deal is amazing.”

“Aeon showed Nelina some, yeah. From the Ghost or whatever. But, it doesn’t really make sense.”

“Make sense? The repetition of overwriting...?”

“Not that. Nelina doesn’t understand how people like that consider themselves to be artists.”

I wanted to refute that argument. However, before I could do so, something suddenly pulled on my body. Nelina’s hand held onto the string of my guitar case, tugging me closer to her. At a distance our heads were about to bump into each other, and she stared me in the eyes.

“And also, what any of that has to do with you, Yoshi.”

As she narrowed her eyes, her gaze felt cold as ice, and yet scorching hot like flames. That nonchalant attitude of hers had run off to nobody knows where. It always goes this way. Just when I thought we’d gotten closer, she suddenly moves away. When I think I could rely on her, she cuts me off. She pretends to not realize, but she’s moving everything the exact way she wants to. Her talent isn’t just her outlandish voice and its beauty, but everyone ends up under her control without even catching on. Be that the flow of the conversation, the air, the people, and...even myself. Just like the people who are led down unfamiliar paths by the spirit animal of the fox, everything goes her way without a single person catching on.

You have no soul—That day, she told me that. Her expression, voice, and the way she grasped my heart, as well as the frozen air around me, I could still remember it vividly. I had intended to run away from her...But whenever she stands in front of me, I’m once again caught in the fog. In reality, I know. I should ask her. This isn’t the time to dance to her tune. Why does she say that? Why did she say that? I

should question her about that.

“C’mon, shouldn’t we hurry? You’ll be late, right? You’re gonna play the guitar, aren’t you?”

“...Yes.”

Nelina removed her hand, allowing me to breathe again. As her skirt fluttered, she ran on ahead, and I found myself chasing after her. Even though I’m the one who should know our destination. Am I... just going around in circles yet again?

*

We walked along the river when we reached the location in question. It was a rather vague place to meet, but I felt no hesitation. The reason is simple. The tall man with his hair and beard stood out quite a bit. The person I would meet was like a landmark.

“Yoshi, my dude...”

Before JF even greeted me, he looked at me and the mysterious follower I had and sighed.

“Did you ever even think of my own feelings?”

“Um?”

I didn’t know what he was talking about, forcing me to give a vague response.

“First it’s the *Ghost*, and now, who? A *Fairy*? What did I do wrong, huh?”

I knew how this looked, but it really wasn’t anything for JF to feel jealous over.

“Ah, he just said fairy, right? See, Nelina’s cuteness is equal all over the world! Yay, I’m a fairy! Right?”

“Just think of her as a *bug* and ignore her.”

Leaving aside Nelina, who played the jester while flapping her arms up and down, I spoke with JF in English.

“That’s what they all say.”

“Too much of a good thing, I say.”

JF shrugged and looked at the guitar case I carried.

“That’s all fine and dandy, but...You ready? They are not gonna hold back.”

I gulped when I heard that. The reason I was here...was to play the guitar. Or rather, it’s to have my ability judged. It all started with JF telling me that a musician he knew was starting up a new project, and since they constantly switched members, JF was part of it here and there. When he invited me to join as a trial run, I was incredibly happy. However, it also meant that I had to make up my mind already. Thanks to meeting Boudicia, I finally made it past my trauma and restarted my guitar practice. That being said, just because my fingers moved didn’t mean that I was back to playing music.

An electric guitar was especially an instrument for an ensemble. Especially as part of the rock genre that I mainly focused on. Of course, I could create the other parts with a sound program, but I wasn’t some genius who could turn everything into gold. But that’s when JF called out to me. It wasn’t anything official on the level of an audition. Rather, they wanted to hear me play, but it was clear that my performance then would decide if they’d let me in or not. To be perfectly honest, I wasn’t too confident. However, when I thought of Boudicia, I had to take my ground here. And think about the possibility—of making music with someone again.

“Also, one more thing.”

“Yes?”

“Could you keep the fact that I’m writing graffiti a secret?”

“Sure, that’s okay with me...”

“He’s rather famous for despising graffiti.”

“...So I’ve heard.”

I was well aware. However, the fact that JF didn’t reveal his hobby despite being together so long as friends meant it was something very serious for the other person. I was slowly getting worried. What if they found out I’m in some way related to graffiti?

“Well, it won’t pop up anyway. Just play as you want, the rest is outta your control.”

“...I’ll do my *best*.”

He’s not wrong. Worrying I can always do it once everything is done. It’s important that they listen to my music. That’s your fate as someone who dedicates themselves to music.

“That’s right, Yoshi is the *best*!”

Since I used an English word, Nelina picked up on it and responded.

“Nelina-san...Please, you really have to keep quiet in there.”

“Okaaay! Like a cat you picked up, right? Meow!”

The graffiti was one thing, but something told me that this girl could cause even more trouble. Either way, Nelina and I followed after JF, who walked alongside the river for a while. The air on this winter night over on our harborside was a bit too cold for my taste.

“This is the place.”

“Right...here?”

I had assumed that we would be heading to a live house. However, JF instead pointed at a boat. It’s not rare to see ships at the harbor side of Bristol. There were a few ships passing through here, big or small. That being said, it looked quite fancy amidst the regular type. It wasn’t the size of a regular boat, you could actually refer to it as a ship. It could even qualify as those carrier ships. The deep area of the water was lit up by its lights, as red letters were written on a billboard. It’s like the ship alone was a different world.

“That’s right, it’s a ship. Told you it’s called [The Ark], remember?”

The Ark—I remember hearing about a live house like that before.

“So this ship...is a live house...!”

“Yeah. Feels very much like Bristol, right?” JF said so while laughing.

He probably kept it a secret on purpose. Thinking about it, we could have also met up right here, but he most likely wanted to surprise.

“Wow! Nelina’s never seen something like this! So glad she came with you!” Nelina jumped up in joy.

I still didn’t feel too happy that she tagged along, but in the face of this sight, I couldn’t lie that I was feeling pumped.

“Can this ship move?”

“Yeah. Not frequently, but for maintenance and such.”

A moving live house in the shape of a boat. I never would have imagined something like that existed. But at the same time, I could feel myself sweating buckets. I’m going to play in a place that was completely different from anything I had ever seen.

“They’re not doing a live concert today, so be sure to check in some time,” JF said and walked down the boarding bridge, which had a penguin painted on it.

Crossing the bridge, I realized that we were really above the water. The color of the water was black and dark. Like it reflected my endless anxiety, but also my excitement to jump in and see beneath the surface.

“Wow...”

Entering after JF, I was first greeted by a bar. The unique outer appearance completely contradicted its interior moody atmosphere. Bottles were lined up on shelves. Beyond the tables and chairs standing at the corner, you could see outside the window to watch the water. It became very obvious that we were inside a ship.

“It’s not open for business today, but this is like the reception area. Over there is the path to the second floor. You can watch the night scenery from the bridge, and you got seats there, too,” JF pointed at the stairs, as he himself walked deeper inside.

I immediately knew what was located there—the live house. Undoubtedly so, even. There was a low stage with speakers set up on both slights, as well as lights shining down on it. The only difference was that the second stage instead consisted of a passage made of simple iron bars. It wasn’t a large hall, either. However, the air in here made it clear that this live house had seen many performances and even more passionate visitors. Despite being far from Japan, the feeling wasn’t all too different. It was hard to believe we were inside a ship.

“Welcome to [The Ark]. You are Yoshi, *aren’t you?*”

He spoke with a gentle voice like it engulfed everything. I looked up in surprise, spotting a white silhouette standing on the stage. The peaceful gaze he gave off beneath his long eyelashes and the gentle smile on his lips reminded me of a sculpture or painting you’d seen in a museum. His white hair genuinely resembled more of a platinum blond, creating waves as it ran down his head. With his long limbs and white clothes, he gave off a divine air.

“Ah, Gabriel. As you requested, I brought him here.”

“Nice to meet you, I’m Yoshi.”

Gabriel gently walked down the stage and stood in front of us.

“I’m Gabriel. It’s a pleasure.”

The smile he created was so enticing and warm. Hearing that he was part of the anti-graffiti faction, I had my own assumptions as to how we would look, but I was relieved that this was the exact opposite.

“And who might this be?”

“*I don’t know. I know nothing.*” JF shrugged, and I added on with a wry smile.

After all, I don't know her either. It's none of my business...or so I wished it to be the case, but alas, Nelina didn't agree.

"Ah, it's time for introductions, huh! Ne...li...na! Nelina!"

"Neliena, is it? What a *beautiful* name."

"He just said beautiful! Right? Gabriel's not half bad. He's got good taste."

"He's not talking about your appearance."

"Wait, really? Nelina thought he was talking about her face."

Let me correct my previous statement. Nelina's just utterly clueless, and I think there's a different problem in the brewing here.

"Anyway, have you listened to my songs?"

"...Yes."

Gabriel didn't mind Nelina's attitude and asked me straight away. I had JF send me all the raw song versions from Gabriel's songs prior to this. When I listened to it for the first time, I genuinely felt like it fit Bristol quite well. JF taught me about Massive Attack and Portishead. Bristol's music definitely isn't cheerful or anything. It has heavy breakbeats, with a beautiful melody matching them, added with reggae, hip-hop, and even jazz elements, all mixing into oddly tranquil music. However, I hadn't listened to his newest project yet, as secrecy was at the forefront this time...Or at least, it wasn't shown before.

"For this project, JF will be my DJ. Drums and bass will be added digitally, whereas I will handle the keyboard and the vocals. You will be the candidate for the guitar player. *Is that clear?*" Gabriel said and I pointed at the musical instrument on my back. "You cannot recreate the *distorted sound* of an electric guitar with a computer. Usually, what I wanted so far is *pureness*, but this gig will require the special attribute of the guitar—The *poignancy*."

"Poignancy..."

“Sadness is too wet. And rather than rage, it’s more like wrath. In a way, it is like a scream.”

That expression left me bewildered. I always held Gabriel as a cheerful person. However, I was still inexperienced, it seems.

“Now then, Yoshi. I’d like to listen to your music. *Can you?*”

“Yes, Gabriel-san.”

I was told to play my own song before focusing on Gabriel’s song. He’s probably planning on testing me. Seeing just what kind of music I would play here, right now. As for Gabriel himself, he sat down on a plastic chair, gently placing it on the ground. JF offered another one to Nelina, who accepted it immediately.

“I put down an amplifier just in case, but please let me know if you need anything else.”

I got up on the small stage, connected my guitar to the equipment I brought with me, connected my cable to the amplifier, and turned the knob. I took a deep breath, and then played a string. It’s the same sound it made in Japan. Granted, it’s my own guitar I brought with me, connected to the equipment I was used to, with the amplifier being of the same maker and the same setting, so it made sense that the sound would be identical. However...

I stopped playing for a long time. And I only started here in Bristol, so creating the same sound that I was used to in Japan was definitely special to me. I could feel Gabriel, JF, and Nelina all looking at me. And then, I closed my eyes. Through my shoulders, I could feel the heaviness of my own instrument. From the neck and strings at my left hand, I felt the wood and metal. In my right hand, I held the pick. My body is regaining the sensation I had forgotten.

I’ve returned—To music. It’s fine, I can play. I put the pick to the cord, and the slight vibration created an electric signal, blasting off from the guitar to the amplifier, and then the speaker created, as the air shook. That vibration made my eardrums. My brain was engulfed in the sound.

I opened my eyes. Elina was right there. ‘You have no soul,’ her words played back in my head. Back then, I thought that all of me was denied. But even so, I still play the guitar. I was struggling to breathe again, so I closed my eyes. What I saw then—was Boudicia’s profile. That’s right. If I’m here, I can do whatever I want. I loosened up a bit and let go with my hands. I can let my body move as it wills. Because I’ve created and played this song several times. My brain, my bones, my muscles, my whole body remembers it. And at this moment, I become the *player*.

—And before I realized it, my performance was already over. I could faintly hear Gabriel’s applause. JF seemed satisfied as he rubbed his chin, too. Gabriel then stood up and came up to the stage, with JF following. Nelina was still sitting on her chair. I can’t really read her expression too well.

“Yoshi, was it?”

I nodded. The gentle pressure he emitted made it impossible for me to say anything else.

“Let me start by stating this. What’s important is the *question*. *Answers* you can always think about. The difficult part is always the *question*, isn’t it?”

“The...*question*?”

“You’ll understand once I ask you. Because you are a *serious* and *honest* person. You can hear the sound of your guitar. And I can tell you’ve done a lot of studying. Your fingers move well, too. That’s why I want to ask you one thing.” Gabriel looked directly at me and then pointed.

“What *meaning* does music have to you?”

“*Meaning*...”

Unable to understand what I had just been asked, I just repeated the same word.

“You can’t answer right away. *Why*?”

“Um, I’m sorry, it was a complex question, so...”

“That’s not quite it.” He spoke with a gentle and warm tone, all the whilst not allowing any yes or no. “The reason you couldn’t answer my question...is because you haven’t thought about that.”

Those words sealed off my ability to breathe. What meaning...does this music have to me? I closed my eyes again...but even now, I couldn’t find an answer.

“All you did was play music. But beyond there...is nothing. Nothing is asked from you. That’s why there’s no place to go. You have no question to ask yourself. No intention. Your music is...Let’s see, it’s *empty*.”

It felt like I was dropped to the bottom of the ocean. I did manage to play my song. However...that was all. Nothing changed. My music has no soul...it’s empty. And the fact that I am this shaken by it... shows that I’m aware of that. I should have been a *player* here. And not just any *player*.

“Hey, Gabriel, that’s a bit...”

“JF.”

JF called out to us after seeing my reaction, but Gabriel pointed his palm toward him.

“What were you planning on doing? Stop me? And what after?” He threw this question at JF.

“Well...”

“See, you can’t answer. Your actions are the exact same. Why would you do that? You didn’t ask yourself. Those who don’t ask themselves can’t find an answer. *Isn’t it?*”

JF’s mouth opened like he wanted to say something, but no words followed.

“What do you think, JF? *Do you think I am wrong?*”

Finally, he dropped his shoulders and stepped back. Then, Gabriel turned toward me again.

“Yoshi. It pains me to say this, but I’m afraid that—”

I knew what he would say next. However, it wasn’t even that much of a shock. Honestly, it was a shame, but it showed my limit. In the end, I am one of those *have-nots*. Unlike those who *have it, the gifted...* Unlike Boudicia and Nelina, I don’t have it.

“Now wait a moment.”

The moment I put down my guitar and had my hand on the strap, I heard a voice. It came from afar, but it was very clear. She danced up on the stage, standing between me and Gabriel.

“You’re badmouthing Yoshi, aren’t you? Nelina can tell.”

Gabriel seemed bewildered as he glanced at JF. He was just as confused and then looked at me. But, I didn’t know what to do either.

“Nelina-san, that’s not what Gabriel-san is saying...”

I tried to explain myself, but Nelina never listened to me from the start. She had one leg on the speaker, looking up at Gabriel as she swung around an invisible microphone.

“You got a mic here?”

Gabriel saw that and smiled, to which he ordered JF to bring a microphone.

“Gabriel, *are you serious?*”

“It’s okay. I can tell. She has this image. She has something she wants to ask me. *Don’t you, Nelina?*”

JF just shrugged and handed Nelina the microphone.

“Ha. Ha. Hey. Tch, tch.”

Nelina checked the condition of the microphone. She’s dead serious.

“Yoshi, you know the deal, right?” Her black eyes looked directly at me.

Yeah, I knew all too well. Or rather, I had it drilled into me. What she wanted to do now...and where this was heading. The mic picked up the faint sound of her breathing in. And then, her voice controlled space and time. I closed my eyes once more and listened to her voice. Even though this is my own song, it's like she knows exactly what I have to play and when. I didn't listen to anything and just followed her voice. Just that alone changed my performance.

I could tell myself. It's the same song, played in the exact same way, and yet it felt like different music. My body is playing music that shouldn't even be inside of me. Like a director at an orchestra, Nelina's voice guided me and my instrument...Yeah, it's always been like this. I was always behind her, pretending not to notice.

And soon after, the song ended. Like we rushed through it with the shortest possible distance. Before, it felt like an eternity, and yet now it ended in a heartbeat. Just by having Nelina with me, everything changes.

“That was amazing! You're like a real *fairy*!”

“Ah, he's praising Nelina! He must be! C'mon, praise her some more! No praise in the world could be enough!”

JF was visibly excited. When I first heard Nelina's performance, I was the same. And yet, I was oddly calm right now as I observed him. Compared to JF, Gabriel was a lot calmer. However, I could tell that the color in his eyes changed to something stronger.

“I see. Yes, yes...I get it now. I guess my way of asking you was mistaken, perhaps. This is who you are. And yes, you may not hold a question yourself, but you answer the question from the outside. Your *emptiness* can be *fulfilled*.”

“Um, well...”

As always, I was unable to grasp what exactly he was saying. However, he seemed a lot more affirmative compared to before. And

not even to Nelina, but to me instead. He must have realized that I had a conflicted expression because he cut off his monologue and declared.

“Yes, I’m sorry. I will be playing with you, *all right?*”

I doubted my ears. Does that mean I passed? For some reason, Gabriel changed his opinion.

“However, I have a few conditions.”

“Yes?”

“What do you think they are?”

“...*I don’t know.*”

So many things happened in this brief moment of time, and my head wouldn’t work properly. That’s why I just blurted out the first thing that went through my head.

“I see. That’s just fine. Don’t lie to yourself and keep taking the correct way. Pretending to know when you don’t isn’t good. And the other thing...” Gabriel cut himself off, placing his hand on the shoulder that carried my guitar strap. “*You are an instrument.*”

His voice, as well as his hand placed on my shoulder, felt heavy like feathers and gentle. And yet, to me, they felt like heavy lead pulling me down.

“From this moment on, your duty is to create wonderful music. Nothing else matters. In that way, you are no longer a *person*. The second you step on this ship, you are an *instrument*,” Gabriel said with an indifferent tone and continued.

But contradicting his tone, the contents were fierce.

“That’s right. I have no interest in anything that isn’t beautiful music. And anything other than that is not allowed. So, let me make myself clear. *You are an instrument. I play you. And, you play music. Understand?*”

It wasn't something so complicated it would force me to say "*Don't know.*" It was all about what role I was supposed to play. And right now, Gabriel was drilling his words into me. Like software being installed, he's leaving me no other option but to forcefully update. I can't say I don't understand it. I just didn't have any other choice.

"...Yes."

"Wonderful. A good response. I'll send you the *track* later. Looking forward to working with you, Yoshi." Gabriel offered me his hand with a smile, and I took it.

"So, Yoshi. Where's Nelina's thanks?" She looked up at me diagonally, poking her finger at my chest.

But I couldn't be angry at that. It was a fact, after all. She's the one who turned around Gabriel's evaluation.

"Um, well...Thank you, Nelina-san."

"See! Nelina is your goddess of victory! Nothing goes well if you don't have her around. So just forget about that dirty stray cat and her graffiti and let's go back to Japan!"

"Graffiti? Did you just say graffiti?"

Gabriel picked up on that vocabulary amidst Nelina's words, leaving me unable to respond immediately. And a prolonged silence acted the same as an affirmation.

"Yoshi, I would rather not ask you this, but you haven't involved yourself with any graffiti business, have you?"

I immediately shook my head. Behind Gabriel, I could see JF doing some crazy acrobatics and gestures. Although I couldn't quite grasp what they entailed, the message got through just fine—"Don't let him find out," he said.

"That's good. If not, I would have been forced to *wipe you off* right here and now."

Wipe off—I couldn't ask what exactly he meant by that. However,

Boudicia's saddened expression popped up in the back of my head. Just who is [Z]? If Gabriel really despises graffiti to such a degree, maybe he would want to *wipe it off* altogether.

"Gabriel-san...Do you dislike graffiti?"

Before I even came to my senses, I had already asked that question. And yet, Gabriel's expression didn't change. Instead, he kept his pleasant smile and spoke up.

"Let's start by considering why you have asked me that question. There are two possible answers. First, you are a graffiti writer, and you're testing how great the danger could be if I were to ever find out. However, you're not stupid. Asking that question could be taken as the confession that you are indeed a graffiti writer, and you should be able to realize that. If so..." His gray eyes looked into the distance. "Someone you know, or even a good friend of yours, is involved with graffiti. *Isn't it?*"

"No, well..."

He was right. I missed my chance to correct him. And as before, it was plenty of an affirmation.

"Well, it's fine. The *sin* of those around you doesn't equal your own *sin*, after all. Though I suggest finding some better friends."

Gabriel purposefully called it a sin. You'd usually never hear that word, especially not in this context. Looking over at JF, his face seemed painful, too.

"The question was why I don't like graffiti, yes? It's not just that I *don't like* graffiti. I actively *hate* it. No, that is even lukewarm. I believe that graffiti is *wrong*."

"Why...is that?"

It looked like he was burning. Like all hair stood on the edge of his body. His voice didn't sound aggressive or violent, but I could tell that he was burning with rage.

"Let me ask you instead, Yoshi. Why is graffiti allowed to exist?"

“That’s...”

“Drawing on the walls of strangers...how could you consider that art? It’s nothing but *destruction*. It’s not *creation*. It’s not correct art. It can’t even be considered a question.”

Before I could speak up to argue, Gabriel continued.

“I cannot allow a culture such as graffiti to represent our beautiful town of Bristol. We have music, so...why?”

“But aren’t music and graffiti closely related?”

I remembered Boudicia’s words and threw in an argument.

“That’s right. Graffiti and music go hand in hand here in Bristol. There are live houses with art drawn on the walls. It is so regrettable. A degradation...Do you happen to know 3D?”

I nodded.

“He was once called Banksy.”

Hearing a name I didn’t expect to pop up, it felt like my heart was grasped. Banksy’s...identity?

“In reality, nobody knows. I personally respect him, and I was raised by his music. But even so, I don’t consider graffiti something that should be allowed.”

Massive Attack is one of the representative bands of Bristol. The albums they brought out in the 90s have reigned in the album charts for a long time, bringing the name of Bristol into the world. And the leader of Massive Attack is Robert Del Naja—also known as 3D. But who would have expected that people suspected him to be Banksy. If that rumor came out, then graffiti and music weren’t just connected. Here in Bristol, it would mean they were identical. And yet, Gabriel was actively trying to remove graffiti.

“And the main culprit...Ahh, I don’t even want to say the name. The one who put graffiti down in the art museum. Such a blasphemy...”

“...The Ghost of Bristol?”

“Please, don’t say that name.”

“...Well, it’s whatever. We all know you can’t stand graffiti, and that’s fine.”

Gabriel didn’t even try to hide his rage any further, as JF now stopped him. Gabriel returned to his senses and took a deep breath.

“Yes. I’m sorry for getting *upset*.”

A moment later, the flame burning inside Gabriel cooled down, turning to cold as ice.

“I want to create beautiful music. To give birth to something that will make people happy. That’s all there is to it.”

“Hey, hey, let Nelina join! Her singing was good, right?”

Gabriel heard Nelina’s Japanese and looked at JF. He then looked at me and shrugged. In truth, I didn’t want to translate Nelina’s words. I came to Bristol by myself. And I came to [The Ark] in order to play music on my own. But in the end, I was powerless by myself. I was aware of that. That’s why I couldn’t ignore Nelina. So, I told Gabriel what she had said. He nodded and then spoke up.

“Yoshi, please tell her what I’m about to say.”

“Yes.”

I took the role of interpreter, as Gabriel and Nelina faced each other.

“Nelina, you hold an *excellent skill*.”

“That’s right! Skill, right?”

Nelina could pick up a word she knew, which had me figure I wouldn’t have to translate this.

“But...you only think of yourself.”

I could feel ice running down my back. And even Nelina’s facial color

changed. What does he mean by that? I listened carefully. I wanted to translate after hearing the whole context.

“If I asked what meaning your music holds, you’d probably answer in a heartbeat. You have the *passion* that drives you toward that answer. You have insatiable *hunger*. And I have *respect* for that. However, have you ever asked yourself, Nelina? Why do you sing?”

Nelina narrowed her eyes.

“Let me be honest with you. I don’t want to play with you. Why? It’s simple.” Gabriel put his large palm on his own chest. “***You don’t have a soul.***”

The one who was shocked the most was me. You have no soul... When Nelina told me that, my heart was broken, and I came here in an attempt to run away. And now, these same words were directed at Nelina. I wasn’t thrilled or anything. I simply never felt like Nelina’s music had no soul. In fact, whenever she was singing, it felt like she felt the whole world with her soul. And yet, she doesn’t have a soul? I couldn’t grasp what he meant. But asking that now wouldn’t benefit anybody, so I told Nelina what Gabriel said.

“Hm. Oh well, fine.”

She didn’t seem particularly shocked, as she just said that and turned her head away. Gabriel also didn’t seem too bothered by this reaction and just asked for my contact information, and then left the stage. Now it was just Nelina, JF, and me.

“Nelina needs to go to the toilet. Where is it?”

I asked JF for the *bathroom*, and Nelina then walked off in the direction JF pointed at. We watched after her for a while, and as I was trying to organize my thoughts about everything that had happened so far, there was one thing I had to tell JF.

“JF-san, thanks.”

“Hm? For what?”

“For helping me out.”

When Gabriel talked me down with my music, he was the one who tried to jump in. I was really happy about that.

“Hah, I didn’t help, though!” Seeing him play it off with a cheerful attitude, one doubt was in my mind.

“So...Why are you making music together with Gabriel-san?”

“Despite being a graffiti writer, you mean?”

“Yes. He seems to utterly despise graffiti, so...”

JF breathed in once and then responded.

“Because I’m *flakey*. I’m not a serious writer, but also not a serious musician either. Of course, I’m no serious barista either.”

“I don’t agree with that, though...”

That was my genuine sentiment. I saw JF’s graffiti before. I may not understand much about style and all that, and even if he wasn’t the second coming of Banksy, he had definite skill, and even I could tell. It was the same with music. He might seem nonchalant about his tracks and make it seem easy, but he took it quite seriously. And his coffee tasted so well because he knew what to do and when. He didn’t seem flakey at all. However, JF continued, as if my own evaluation didn’t matter much.

“Gabriel’s amazing. He makes me wanna work with him despite his hate for graffiti. He’s one of the younger musicians of Bristol to bring a new wind. And he’s the one bringing glory to [The Ark].”

It wasn’t anything surprising. Listening to his tracks, and the way he presented himself, I knew he had the skills to pay the bills.

“Well, his personality is just as you can see. Not many people stayed with him for long, even if they had the charisma.”

I could tell. Gabriel is very open-minded and big-hearted. He didn’t even judge me for knowing someone who was into graffiti. Deep down, he must be a kind soul. I was too busy to give it some thought just now, but now that I had a bit of leeway, there was something off

about Gabriel's attitude. He brought up the story of the Ghost of Bristol himself, yet didn't want to hear that name like he had some special connection to that individual.

"Why does he despise the Ghost?"

"I don't know that, either. He was always open about his distaste for graffiti, but it's gotten extremely aggressive lately. Maybe right after he saw the news of the incident at the art museum, but that's all I know."

I thought about it for a moment and then asked another question.

"...JF-san, have you heard of [Z]?"

"Yeah. From the Captain. The Ghost's graffiti fell victim to them, right?"

"What do you think?"

"I got no clue."

"Is that so..."

"Man, I've been saying the same stuff for a hot minute now, huh? I don't know a dang thing, haha!"

"I'm sorry, I keep asking these weird questions."

"Well, if it was any ordinary writer, they'd just have overwritten it. I figured that maybe it was some personal attack against graffiti. And they have the advantage because we don't know who."

Yeah, if it was a writer's work, they would have simply overwritten Boudicia's work. At the very least, it seemed like this act wanted to convey some sort of message. And not being known would only demerit any regular writer.

"...Are you looking for the culprit?"

"I'd like to find them, at least."

“For the sake of the Ghost?”

“Huh? No, um, I was curious.”

“I think I am kind of jealous.”

“Excuse me?”

A word I didn’t expect to pop up completely threw me off balance, so I was forced to return a question. *Jealous?*

“Y’know, it always feels like you’re *going your own way*.”

“Is that so?”

JF used both his hands to create the gesture of a path. But, if I was truly walking my own way, then I wouldn’t be this shaken by Nelina at every move.

“Even for me, it’s time that I *decide which way to go*...”

Right when I wanted to ask what exactly he meant by that, Nelina returned. And since we had no further reason to stay, we got off the ship and split up from JF. Time had already progressed quite a bit. Even if public safety in Bristol wasn’t particularly awful, I couldn’t let Nelina walk home all by herself while it was dark outside.

“...I’ll escort you home.”

“Ah, did you finally understand your job?”

“There’s nothing to understand. It’s necessary for your safety.”

“Hmph.”

Normally, she would be a lot more persistent with her teasing, but right now, she seemed a bit out of it. Her inn was in the direction of Clifton, so we headed down west on the harbor side. I walked ahead, with Nelina following after. But that’s also why, when I heard a dull sound on this dark road, I was so surprised I thought my heart would leap out of my chest. Turning around, I saw a trash bin with the city’s sailing ship mark fallen to the side, as Nelina stood next to it, her leg

raised.

“Aww man, Nelina’s leg slipped.”

“What?!”

“It’s no big deal. Nelina’s not angry at all. Not like she wanted to have some fun with Yoshi only to be interrupted by that nasty stray cat. Not like she’s bothered by the fact that she got rejected despite being the one to help Yoshi’s performance in the first place. Seriously, all of them are just so all over the place, Nelina can’t deal with it.”

Despite what she said and pretended, her tone and actions clearly showed she was furious. And kicking the garbage bin at the side of the road was just her way to vent out her anger. I fixed the poor garbage bin and flashed a wry smile. I’ve been the victim of her violence so many times I lost count. And what’s worse is that she always does it when nobody else is around. If I said that Nelina kicked a garbage bin, I doubt the people in our band would even believe me.

“You never change, do you?”

I meant to say this with light feelings, but my words came out sharper than I myself expected.

“Did you change, Yoshi?” Nelina’s eyes pierced me.

It tied me up, leaving me unable to move as she approached me.

“After coming here...did you change?”

Before today’s performance, I would have answered with a confident yes. But now...I’m not too sure anymore. Coming to Bristol, encountering graffiti, and meeting her...Surely, there must be something that has changed. But at the very least, my music has remained the same. I simply returned to my original position.



“...Nelina-san.”

“Yes?”

“Well...I didn’t tell you just now, but...Gabriel-san said that your singing has...no soul.”

Nelina’s movement stopped. However, she didn’t seem too shocked,

either.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hide it. I just...”

I knew that making excuses here showed my guilt. But, I wanted to find out.

“Nelina-san. Back then, why did you...”

Why did you say that I have no soul? But before I could finish my sentence, I was forced to become silent. That was because Nelina placed her index finger on my lips.

“If there’s something you wanna ask, then Nelina would have the right to ask first, no?”

“What logic is that...” I pushed her hand away as I argued.

And yet, I knew she wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“Yoshi...why did you leave Nelina behind?”

“I didn’t leave you behind.”

“Because she told you that you had no soul?”

That’s right—is what I screamed in my head. But if I said that out loud, I thought she was grasping my weakness even further.

“Nelina isn’t angry. Because she’s kind. She’s not bothered by the fact that you left, so come back, okay?”

The translucent but determined tone of her voice felt sweet and burning at the same time. Just hearing that voice makes the inside of my brain slowly melt and dull my determination.

“Nelina’s pretty greedy, and you should know that, right? That’s why she wants whatever she’s hungry for. Nothing ever doesn’t go Nelina’s way.”

Shockingly enough, she held no doubt or concern toward the things she just said. It’s like she was just stating the facts.

“Surely, Gabriel-san’s gonna come back eventually and invite Nelina into his band.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“Hehe, we’ll see.”

Even this small resistance I offered up was immediately erased by Nelina, disappearing into the night breeze that passed us. And as I looked at her back, I was thinking again. So many things don’t make sense. Who is [Z]? Why is Gabriel so concerned with the Ghost? Why did Nelina say that my music holds no soul? And...what did Boudicia want to tell me? I stopped in my tracks, looking at the pitch-black River Avon. All my thoughts felt like they sunk deeper into the river and eventually vanished.

*

The following day, I went to see Aeon. Since I heard he’d be heading off to Japan tomorrow, I hesitated about visiting him, but he stood at the cash register like during our first meeting. It almost surprised me to see him like that.

“Hello, Aeon-san.”

“Ah, Yoshi. What brings you here?”

“Sorry to have pushed Nelina-san onto you like that.”

I probably lowered my head while saying so because it was drilled into me through Japanese customs.

“Haha, I’m thankful, if anything. She told me quite a few interesting stories.”

“She didn’t give you much trouble, did she?”

“I did show her around town a bit, as well as the Ghost’s graffiti, but at least in front of me, she was always a polite *lady*. The *Japanese pink*, no? What was it...Yamato Nadeshiko, right.”

A Yamato Nadeshiko? I couldn’t help but show my confusion. That

doesn't fit with her at all. Nor does the Japanese Pink, either. It's more like American Psycho with her.

"As long as she wasn't too selfish..."

Aeon heard my words and then grinned brightly.

"I see, so she's the selfish type when she's in front of you."

Nelina was exceptionally good when it came to putting on an act. I was just relieved to hear she didn't make any trouble for Aeon, though.

"It's tough. Why would she suddenly come to Bristol without being able to speak any English..."

"I suggest you give that some proper thought, Yoshi."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Put yourself into her shoes."

"Her feet are bare. She relishes her freedom, and I haven't the foggiest what's on her mind."

"It's important to understand the *feeling of the feet.*"

"Feeling..."

Honestly, I never really thought about this. Nelina always lives freely. Rather than standing on solid ground, it's like she is just running around on bare feet. She's always teasing, always contradictory, almost like a *fairy*. As her feet are off the ground, does she even have any *feeling* in that regard?

"Aeon-san, have you heard of [Z]?"

I don't want to think about Nelina when she's not even with me, so I chose to change the topic. That's also what I wanted to ask first and foremost.

"Yeah. Lara told me. Boudicia's graffiti got sliced up, didn't it?"

“Yes. And...I was wondering who it could have been. Plus, I heard that more people have been speaking against graffiti...”

“Gabriel, right.”

I wasn't too shocked to hear Aeon mention that name.

“So you know him.”

“I'm quite fond of his music. That being said, I only heard the rumors about him, nothing more.”

“And...who did that to Boo-san's graffiti, you think?”

“Hm...” Aeon crossed his arms in front of his thick chest plate and stared into the empty space through his sunglasses. “...Yoshi. Don't you feel like this world is much more *complicated* than what we give it credit for?”

“*Complicated?*”

I returned the question.

“I personally like the *concept* that *Buddhism* is the *middle way*,” he now looked at me as he continued. “Sometimes, we have to fight. But, I personally like to stop and think before doing that. Maybe there is just something we hadn't seen up to that point. *Open, recognize, understand*. When we reach a point where we can't pick either choice, we are stuck in a *conflict* that forces us to create an *option*. What's important is how we get away from the *conflict*.”

Something we don't see...Another option...Moving away from *conflict*?

“I'm sorry, I...don't really understand it.”

I chewed on his words for a moment, until I finally confessed that I drew a blank. However, Aeon still continued to smile.

“That's okay. You can always grab that one book that it's on the bookshelf. If you keep it stored somewhere in your mind, it'll be of help for you eventually.”

Middle way. Option. Conflict. It feels like I could create some type of connection with just a bit more. But, he's probably right when he's saying that I can't see something. But let alone revealing that, I'm lost in what context, even. I'll just take his words to heart and remember them if the need for them ever arises.

"You're leaving tomorrow, right? Sorry to rob you of your time like this."

"Oh please, I'm not one to get caught up with lengthy preparations. I just leave when my heart desires. And it's not my first time going to Japan, either...Well, it will be a first during the Christmas season. Anyway, it's nothing you have to be worried about."

Yeah, that does feel more like Aeon-san. He can express himself in Japanese, and he probably knows that he can get almost anything he needs over there.

"Thank you very much. I'll give it some thought," I said and left the paint shop.

I wonder how Japan is doing right now. It hasn't even been that long, and yet it feels like I've been living in Bristol for years. Looking up at the sky, I could see a plane that probably just took off at Bristol Airport.

COLUMN 1

ブリストルの音楽

ブリストルは音楽の発信地としても世界的に有名である。ヒップホップやレゲエをはじめとしたさまざまなジャンルが混ざりあった独自のサウンドで知られ、「ブリストル・サウンド」「トリップ・ホップ」といったジャンル名で呼ばれる場合もある。

もっとも代表的なアーティストは3Dことロバート・デル・ナジャが率いるマッシュヴ・アタックで、90年代以降は全英チャート上位の常連となり、〈Mezzanine〉〈100th Window〉では1位も獲得している。

グラフィティ・カルチャーとの結びつきが強く、3Dはグラフィティ・ライターとしても著名であり、バンクシーの正体ではないかという噂もある。



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Chapter 3: “Flat of the Blade”

Two weeks have passed since then. Gabriel would regularly send me the tracks for his new project, asking me to consider how I would play the part of the guitar. This must be his type of question. If so, I had to answer according to how I saw fit. And with that being the case, I gave the track a listen. The drums and bass focused on a breakbeat rhythm, fitting the sound I was used to. Meanwhile, the piano, presumably played by Gabriel, sounded kind yet cold. And it seemed like the guitar was the only part missing. Well, he must have cooked up a track himself, but he probably wants to grant me the option to see for myself. The only difference from before is that the tempo of the whole song was a bit faster.

I think I’ve heard this before. It must be...rock. Despite the individual ingredients not matching that at all, the overall image oddly enough led me to come up with that assumption. I don’t know if this matches Gabriel’s intention, of course. I had my guitar on my lap, periodically playing a few strings to then take notes on my computer.

Oddly enough, Nelina had kept quiet for most of the past two weeks. Granted, she’d only give me a headache if she was around, but the way she made no sound whatsoever had me worried, too. When I texted her to find out what she was up to, she’d just send me a wink or kiss emoji, which crept me out by a lot, but I figured it was best to leave her alone.

I had to focus on the guitar parts, after all, and I still had my university classes, paired with my part-time job at the 8-Bit World. I didn’t really find any chance to talk with Boudicia either, so I haven’t told her that I was part of Gabriel’s band now. Because of the season, we’ve been simply so busy at work. Granted, I should just ask her to meet up somewhere to talk, but...I just couldn’t muster up my courage. I sighed at my own pathetic self and decided I should grab a bite to eat, so I entered a bakery on Park Street.

Bristol University has a long history here in town, and as the UK hasn't suffered any major catastrophes, you could still see older buildings of the university scattered throughout the town. It's almost as if the whole city is the university. And since this bakery is between two separate study rooms, I often come here. I figured I could go for something sweet so I looked at the round and filled donuts when a conversation reached my ears. Normally I wouldn't bother much, but the name Gabriel caught my attention.

"Did you read that?"

"Gabriel's, right? I didn't really like graffiti too much, either."

"I've been listening to his stuff, but I don't necessarily hate the graffiti, though..."

"But it's a crime! And it's wrong."

I could feel my body shaking. Something was happening. In a hurry, I took out my smartphone and looked up Gabriel's name. *Did you read it?* I remembered the social network post that Lara showed me before. Maybe he wrote something else on there. I immediately got a search result. A music media site published an interview with Gabriel. This must be it. I had already forgotten about my hunger and turned my back toward the bakery, reading through the English lines like I was eating them up.

—We've heard you're working on a new project. What concept can we expect this time?

Gabriel:

To me, music is an expression of love and beauty. So far, I've mainly created digital works playing in the space of reggae or hip-pop, following the great examples of black musicians, but I think it's time for me to return to my *origin*.

My grandmother is actually quite fond of music, and she always liked the rock genre in particular. She was a wild but warm person, wearing the largest sunglasses. However, she passed away last year. That's when I decided to have a closer look at the rock genre.

—We were told that a new member has joined your band. How did you choose him?

Gabriel:

I only play with people I can put my faith in. They surprise me, and I can assure you they will live up to their expectations.

—It's come to the public eye that you are quite against the existence of graffiti. And you advocate its abolishment, too.

Gabriel:

A wonderful question. Do you like graffiti?

—Um, well...

Gabriel:

The fact that you can't answer immediately tells me that you are quite fond of it. But don't worry, I won't just leave you hanging in the middle of the interview. Let me change the question. Graffiti is a monumental culture that symbolizes the historical struggle against the system done by the citizens of Bristol. Could you agree with that?

—Yes, surely.

Gabriel:

I agree. As a citizen of Bristol, we should raise our voices against what is not right. And so far, graffiti has been used, rightfully so, as a mechanism to achieve that. However, is it really something that only graffiti can accomplish? It destroys the walls, hurts other people, the list goes on. Where is the need to abide by such a limiting device? During a live concert, The Who destroyed a drum set, yes. However, that happened at that stage. Even the Sex Pistols, who split up after a fight, did not destroy the walls of other people's homes. That's what it means to think in terms of rock.

—The other day, an incident of graffiti vandalism happened at the art museum. Many people welcomed a strong and determined message against the purge of the Bearpit, whereas others argued that it was the destruction of public property.

How do you feel about the Ghost of Bristol?

Gabriel:

The Ghost, yes. I always prefer to distance myself from that name, but it keeps being brought up around me. But, I cannot call that individual a Ghost. It feels more like a rotten Beast that has gone out of control. They are wrong. The graffiti should be erased, and they should make amends for their actions. If I had them in front of me, I don't know if I could control myself.

—However, the art museum still has Banksy's work on display, no? Could we really deny the history we shared with such?

Gabriel:

Leaving aside my personal feelings, we should respect history. However, it is in the past. Graffiti has fulfilled its purpose. And all citizens should ask themselves...if graffiti is truly necessary for Bristol as it is right now. I aim to bring an answer to this question using our music. We will hold a live concert on Christmas eve on [The Ark]. And that will be the day when everyone learns that music is what will represent Bristol from now on. What's important will remain on the ark, whereas the unnecessary luggage will fall. The name of our new project is [New Announcement]. From now on begins our generation. And it will act as the new announcement. I don't like using such barbaric words, but let me make it clear for the rats that crawl along the streets—We will overwrite your graffiti.

How could this happen? New Announcement...I didn't hear about any of that. But it's the new project Gabriel has been working toward...It's the name of our band. Announce...Notice...Information...Or even—Annunciation. It showed Gabriel's personality, the fact that he believed in him being absolutely right, giving it a one-sided announcement. The righteous ones will remain on the boat, whereas the others will meet demise. What's important isn't the name of the band...Graffiti will...be eradicated?

I raised my head. What I saw in front of me on the wall was a pure coincidence. It was graffiti—ripped into pieces by lightning cutting through it.

“This is...!”

I started running. Familiar walls jumped into my view. The graffiti on there had lighting going through them. One, and then another. While chasing after [Z], I reached the Bearpit. Down the stairs, through the tunnel, I heard a familiar voice, but with a tone I never knew.

“Lara, *calm down!*”

“*Calm down?* Do you not understand what’s going on?”

It was Boudicia and Lara.

“How is this a *calm* sea? This is a *storm!* Haven’t you read it? It’s a *declaration of war!*”

“But that’s also why you can’t just give in to their provocation!”

“You’re wrong. *We are under attack!*”

The two didn’t realize that I had arrived, continuing their verbal fight.

“What happened?” I asked Peni, who had watched this for a while longer than me.

“...It was [Z] again.” He answered without looking away from the two.

“I saw them on the way here. Is there more?”

“Not just more. All the graffiti in the city got done in by [Z].”

“...I’m sorry.”

I didn’t even mean to, but I apologized.

“Why are you apologizing, Yoshi?”

“I wanted to figure out who [Z] is, but...”

“Just the fact you’re trying to help is more than enough.”

No. I don't have any right to receive gratitude like this. It's true that I didn't manage to find out anything about [Z], and I do feel bad for that...But more than that, nobody knows I'm a member of [New Announcement]. I'm part of the same band as Gabriel.

"The disdain toward graffiti has gotten stronger, and the Captain must be tired."

Naturally, Peni had no way of knowing about my guilt. He just smiled without vigor and energy, as he looked at Lara.

"And what about you, Boo? Who are you teaming up with?"

Rarely enough, Lara was filled with rage. It made Boudicia look like the rational one.

"This isn't the time to talk about friend or foe. We got hit, so we fight back. That's all there is to it. It's what we've always been doing! And you were the one who said that simply overwriting it won't be enough! Just fighting back mindlessly isn't gonna work!"

"Must be great for you. Just doing whatever you please...I bet you don't even care about Bristol!"

"That's enough!"

"Enough? So if I say it's enough, someone will save us...save Bristol's graffiti? The genius graffiti writer, the Ghost of Bristol, will save us? Don't make me laugh. We have done nothing yet!"

Lara's voice was hoarse, broken, and husky. She had given such a motivational speech when the purge of the Bearpit was on the line, so it's clear that she's out of steam right now. Or rather, she probably was aware of that herself. I remembered the rumors. Gabriel's declaration of war, the denial of graffiti, and now, the center of the graffiti culture, the Bearpit, was attacked. How heavy must all of this weigh down on the leader of **Queen Bear's Revenge**? I had no way of knowing.

"Captain."

"Peni! Don't get in my way!"

“Please...just get some rest.” He offered her a coffee.

JF watched over her with a worried gaze.

“You...”

Lara slowly lowered the hand she had wildly swung around. And then, she quietly spoke up.

“...Boo, I’m sorry. I can tell you’re worried about me.”

“Lara, you...”

“But right now, if we don’t fight this *disrespect*...and if graffiti disappears...then I’ll regret it for the rest of my life.

Boudicia didn’t answer. Instead, she walked toward Lara, gently placing her left hand on her shoulder. Lara put her hand on Boudicia’s.

“...That’s right. We have to move forward. We have to figure out who [Z] is...and what their goal is, too.”

“And what do we do?”

“First, we should check out the situation. I haven’t gotten around to checking all of them.”

I was surprised. If Lara hadn’t gotten around to checking everything, the number must be greater than I expected.

“I’ll go with you,” I said.

“There’s a lot of them, you know?”

“That’s fine,” I said and stood next to Boudicia, glancing at her profile.

Who is this [Z] person that destroyed her graffiti? This time, I want to stop them. And depending on how you think of it, we may have more hints now. But just standing around and waiting won’t get us anywhere.

“I’m going, too,” Boudicia said, still not looking at me.

“I’m happy you’re willing to tag along, but...” Lara lowered her face, muttering to herself.

She probably feels hesitant as she really blew a fuse not too long ago. She’s become like a sheep. Normally, Lara is strong like a bear, and yet she was nothing more than a docile animal.

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s just go. I got hit by this, too, so I’m curious.”

From that point on, we started walking around Bristol. In a way, I couldn’t even be surprised that Lara was aware of all the graffiti locations in the town. And since she said she wasn’t done yet, she probably used her crew network to check. The graffiti of Bristol is practically dancing on her palm. Except now they were injured through this attack. It seemed endless, but there was a definitive number—which was 32 cases.

When I heard the number at first, I didn’t think it was that big of a deal. However, going around like this, it really changes your perspective. 32 places is 32 pieces of graffiti. If these were paintings, you could practically open an art gallery. Not to mention that they were scattered around town. It took a lot out of me to simply run around and look for them. I opened my map app and wrote memos for all the graffiti we encountered. It mostly focused on the area of the Bearpit, and although some went north to Stokes Croft, the majority was in a circular area centering near the Bearpit. The radius was around 1,5km. It wasn’t anything outrageously large, but focusing on 32 graffiti in this area sure didn’t feel like a prank.

Just running around like we were was more than just exhausting, but even carrying a pressure washer or the like with you requires some serious determination and stamina. Surely, it became clear now that [Z] holds immense willpower toward something...The question was just what exactly they worked toward. Meanwhile, Boudicia remained silent for the majority of our search. She seemed like she was lost in thought, showing a complicated expression. At first, Lara was openly complaining about Gabriel and [Z], figuring out who the destroyed graffiti belonged to, but toward the end, she had become

silent, too. Sure enough, I wasn't as nonchalant as to assume she was just tired. She's thinking about something...but what exactly?

After we finished checking all the graffiti in question, we headed back to the Bearpit. Peni offered us a table, and JF brought some of his coffee, which smelled as great as always. It seemed to have chocolate as a main ingredient, with a beautiful orange color. He said he didn't consider him serious, but I personally think he's a proper barista.

"How did it go?" Peni carefully asked.

Boudicia remained silent, sending Lara a gaze.

"Personally, I don't think there's any connection between them."

Since both of them went quiet, I checked the pictures I took on my smartphone and answered Peni's question. Although they gathered in a certain radius, the choice seemed random. In fact, they probably just went for whichever they could go for.

"No, there is a connection."

"Huh?" I asked in confusion.

Lara crossed both her arms and legs, as she gazed into the emptiness.

"All the graffiti that was hurt today...belonged to crew members of **Queen Bear's Revenge**."

It felt like lightning struck my own thoughts. Lara knew about all the graffiti of her crew members, so she must be confident about that. But that would bring up another question.

"...So it's a targeted attack from the anti-graffiti faction?"

"Probably..." Boudicia answered as she stuffed her hands into her pockets.

"Yoshi...Did you realize that all the graffiti was done by **Queen Bear's Revenge** folks?"

“No...I had no idea.” I answered honestly.

“Yeah, I figured. Someone who doesn’t write graffiti...or actually, someone who doesn’t know the situation around here wouldn’t be able to tell.”

“Ah...”

I see. This must have been done by someone who knows **Queen Bear’s Revenge**. Then...there’s another fact revealed by this...That [Z] is a graffiti writer...?

“Lara, what are you gonna do now?” Boudicia asked.

“This is our problem, so we will overwrite it.”

“Let’s do it, Captain! We’ll show everyone that we won’t just get beaten down!”

“No...I’ll handle all of it.”

Right as Peni was getting heated, Lara broke his enthusiasm with a cold face. He formed a fist and then looked over at JF, who stood inside the bus.

“As the Captain, I’ll crush them. It’s a duel between me and [Z]. I won’t allow you to intervene. Is that clear?”

“But I want to help!”

“I’m sorry, but you’re not strong enough for this.”

“But...!”

This wasn’t the Lara I knew. Before, she used the strength of everyone to protect the Bearpit. Yet, she now wants to fight by herself?

“Captain, is there really nothing we can do?” JF got off the bus and asked Lara with a heavy tone.

“Nothing.” Lara put one hand on her hip as she said so.

“...Peni, you heard her. Let’s go.” JF said and pointed at the exit of the plaza with his chin, walking away.

Peni followed after him but turned around several times until he completely went out of sight. And Lara watched his back that entire time.

“...Lara-san, are you sure you should be doing that on your own?” I asked.

We were looking at 32 graffiti. It will take tremendous amounts of time and effort to overwrite all of those. Plus, there’s no guarantee that [Z] will just stop at that. Can she really handle all this by herself while [Z] might be coming back for more? Yet, Lara looked at me and smiled.

“Of course. Who do you think I am?”

So she said, but it lacked her usual confidence.

“...Lara.” Boudicia slowly opened her mouth. “You just don’t want the others to get involved in this, right?”

“...I swear, why do you have to immediately see through everything, Boo?” Lara sighed and stopped faking the smile she had on her face all this time.

“Do you...really?”

Was that really the case? I couldn’t tell in the slightest. But Lara’s gaze told me enough.

“This isn’t any regular graffiti. Even if we overwrite their reverse graffiti, there’s no telling what they might be doing next. And I can’t fathom what the writer who fights back might suffer through.”

“But that doesn’t mean you have to...”

“...Yesterday, someone from my crew was attacked.”

“What?” I was bewildered.

“He was seen while writing graffiti. Got jumped by three people, beaten up, and was sent to the hospital with broken bones.”

“No way...”

I felt like the public perception of graffiti was slowly drifting downward. However, I had no idea that there were direct encounters with such malicious intent. Of course, graffiti could always be regarded as *vandalism*. But that didn't mean citizens could now resort to violence to resolve that.

“I don't know who did it, and there's no point in looking for them, either. They could have been just some aggravated citizens. But...”

“You think it's because of the interview?”

“Probably. I don't know if it's Gabriel pulling the strings behind the scenes, but the citizens have started to jump on his bandwagon, saying that graffiti is wrong. I can't let someone from my crew write in such a situation.”

I understand where she's coming from. However, that won't resolve the situation. Nobody will be happy if Lara just stands at the frontlines and sacrifices herself.

“I'm fine. I *decided my fate*.”

She said as if she had seen through my thoughts. The red color of the setting sun illuminated her white shoulders. For a moment, she looked like she stood on the bow of a ship, as she pointed ahead without hesitation.

“If you decided on that, then I won't say a thing. You've got your own way of doing things. But...”

“But?”

“Don't lose, okay?”

“Heh, I will win, of course. And I've got some ideas for my fight with Gabriel, too. If he's using a ship to fight, then I will fight back in fashion. No way I'll let him do as he pleases.”

Lara's heavy boots stomped on the ground as she walked away while waving her hand. Meanwhile, Boudicia and I watched her off.

"...I couldn't do a thing."

"You mean with [Z]? Don't sweat it." Boudicia's voice hit me where it hurt.

Even so, the what-if scenario still keeps popping into my mind. If I had found [Z], then...But, what Lara said is right. This is a problem involving the whole Bearpit, as well as all writers of Bristol. There's probably nothing left for me to do. But, what about Boudicia? There's no way she doesn't feel anything during such a situation.

"Are you not going to help her?"

"Do you think it'd be better if I did?"

"No, that's not..."

The question fired back at me left me silent.

"I think this is Lara's problem."

"What do you mean?"

"Well...I'm not too confident about it yet..."

It was rare to see Boudicia so vaguely. She fixed her cap, hiding her blue eyes.

"Plus...I decided that I'd only write for my sake."

"For your sake..."

"Bristol, graffiti, and all that...It's too big for me. I don't wanna lose grip on it and let it fall down like those figures on the shelves at the shop."

I still couldn't see her eyes, but it was clear she looked at her hands. She then tightly gripped her left hand, raising her head.

"It's...because you told me. That I should write for my own sake."

Her narrowed eyes, and her wet lips, it all softly grasped my heart.

“That’s why...Until I feel like writing, I’m not gonna do a thing.”

She’s been writing solely to win this entire time. So when she realized that her right hand, which held all her talent, wasn’t usable anymore, she put away the spray can. And the only reason she can write now is that she doesn’t have to carry anything. To carry the whole of Bristol’s graffiti, her left hand was too weak for that.

“Um...there is something I need to tell you.”

I decided to not hide things any longer. I have to tell her.

“It’s about Christmas day.”

“Huh? Wait, you too? Darn, out with it, then!”

I was surprised to hear that Boudicia wanted to talk about Christmas, just like me. However, stopping here would risk my chance of telling her, so I continued.

“The thing is...”

“Ah, finally found you! Geez, Nelina was looking for you everywhere!”

And yet, my determination was ruined when I heard a familiar, sweet voice.

“Seriously! You better be ready to come running whenever Nelina calls for you!”

“N-Nelina-san?! What were you up to all this time?!”

Just like a fox appearing out of nowhere to wrap its tail around your leg, Nelina approached me and pushed her face closer to me. Her breath hitting me was sweet and hot.

“Hey, Nelina managed to make it into your band, you know! Just as she said, right?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

She did declare that Gabriel would eventually let her join their band. I haven't forgotten about that, but is that really possible...?

“You again, you *fox*.”

Boudicia glared at the fox—rather, the wild boar rampaging through her fields like a hunter. And for a second, I thought she held a gun aimed at Nelina's head, even.

“Huh? Fox? You said that before, right? But some stray cat like you has no right to!”

“What did you come here for?”

“Nelina can't stand you. You only have talent for some random doodles! Should you really pretend to be an artist? Graffiti is hella lame, seriously.”

“It's weird...I can't understand a word you're saying, and yet it feels like I know exactly what you just said. You're making fun of me, right?”

“Don't try to steal away someone else's belongings, you shitty thieving cat.”

“You wanna fight? I'll make a *scarf* outta your fur.”

“Nelina's high-quality fur would be wasted on your dirty and ragged stuff!”

“Tsk. Whatever, let's just go! Can't be bothered to give this woman any attention!”

Boudicia grabbed my hand with her left one and pulled me along. Not to mention quite fiercely. So much that it hurt, even. And yet, her hand was hot. It's like she's burning up.

“Boo-san, please wait. I ended up joining a band to make music, so that's why...” I said in the heat of the moment.

Hearing that, Boudicia stopped.

“What did you just say?”

“I joined a band to play the guitar.”

At first, she looked at me in disbelief. Like she didn’t even understand what I had just said. Following that, I could see a red flame burn up in her eyes, which quickly quieted down into a cold blue.

“Right. I see. That’s what you wanted to talk about, huh? Good for you, being able to play again.”

She doesn’t seem happy to me at all. Or, she might be, but it wasn’t a blessing at all. Nor was it sarcasm. Looking at her narrow eyebrows and quivering lips, I could tell.

“And she’s part of that band?”

“That’s...”

I tried to shake off Nelina, who still held onto my arm with a bright smile, but she wouldn’t move an inch.

“...I don’t really understand what’s so great about some stalker woman who came all the way from Japan. But either way, you wanna keep doing your music, right? *Nice. Fantastic. Brilliant.*”

She knows me from when I couldn’t play the guitar. And she knows for what reason I tried to play again.

“Yoshi...You should play for your own sake, too. You told me the same thing, right? That’s why...” She started walking toward me, passed me by, but bumped into my shoulder at that exact moment. “...It’s got nothing to do with me!”

The impact made my body shake, as I staggered backward. If Nelina hadn’t held onto my arm, I probably would have fallen over.

“Boo-san!”

She didn’t turn around and just continued running. It was only for a

moment, so I wasn't confident in declaring this. However, when she glared at me, it felt like she was tearing up.

"Bye-bye, Stray Cat-san! Nobody asked for you to be here anyway!"

I never saw myself as a person who would move based on my emotions. I rarely laugh from the bottom of my heart or shed tears at something. I guess I might always be cold and rational. You could even call me heartless. But right now, at this very moment, it felt like all my blood vessels were boiling.

"Nelina-san, just what are you even trying to do here?!"

"Didn't Nelina tell you? Gabriel let me join the band. Now we can be together again, Yoshi."

I roared in a loud voice I didn't know I even had. Yet, Nelina was still calm as she answered. Seeing her like that, it felt as if water had poured on my fire, and I regretted my actions.

"...How?"

"Hm...Body language, maybe?"

"Don't fool around now," I said, and then felt like something was off in Nelina's voice.

It's such a small difference, you probably wouldn't even realize it if you hadn't been in a band with her for a long time. The rumors never stopped with Nelina. One of her fans fell in love with her, only to encounter another stalking fan, to which they beat each other up, how she found out the executive of a record label was off cheating, that maybe she was even the person he was cheating with, that she ruined the relationships within a rivaling band...All these absurd stories went around, and before we met in person, I genuinely thought I would be having a meeting with the devil himself. That being said, playing the guitar by her side, I realized she was quite different from the rumors. However...It's evident that she has the talent to control the people around her.

"Ah, hey! Where are you going, Yoshi?!"

I shook her off before she could stop me. Why did the angel allow the fox on the ark? I needed to know that, no matter the cost.

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“Gabriel-san!”

“Hey there, Yoshi. Is there anything that needs answering?”

Gabriel sat at the bar of [The Ark], sitting at a sofa table. Yet again, he’s alone. JF said that his bands usually don’t continue on for long. At first, I didn’t give it much attention, but I guess that was actually true.

“Would you like to sit down?”

I sat on the seat Gabriel tapped on.

“What are you drinking?” I looked at the golden liquid poured into a small glass.

Since I rushed her, my heart was still racing. And while I was calming down, I chose to ask whatever came to my mind.

“Ah, this? It’s beer. Since you’re asking that question, I’m assuming you don’t regularly drink alcohol?”

“That’s right.”

“Here in Bristol, craft beer is the hit. We have a lot of microbreweries, so the taste varies greatly.”

Since he seemed the type of person to drink wine, I was surprised to hear he was into beer.

“You seem to like beer.”

“I like anything that is beautiful. The same goes for food and drinks. I consider myself a connoisseur.”

I took a deep breath and then cut into the main topic.

“Why did you let Nelina-san as the vocalist of your band?”

“Mm, good question. I knew you’d come to ask me that. I have two reasons. The first is...that she wished for it.”

That’s absolutely right, but that isn’t enough of an explanation.

“That hasn’t changed from before. But you said you wouldn’t let her join. How and why did you change your opinion this much?”

“That’s also a good question. But the answer to that is just as simple. It’s because I’ve grown interested in her.”

He’s grown interested in her...Could such a vague reason really exist? Not when it’s Gabriel, that’s for sure.

“This doesn’t qualify as an answer.”

“*Brilliant.* I knew you had something to you.”

“Don’t try to change the topic.”

“I’m not so arrogant as to believe I am omnipotent, Yoshi. I don’t see through everything that is presented in front of me. In fact, I fail many times over. Even my first evaluation of you wasn’t even correct. Don’t you agree?”

Yeah. When I played together with Nelina, his opinion changed. I wanted to ask for that reason, too, but that doesn’t matter.

“But if I understand that there is something I hadn’t seen before, then I can change my opinion. That’s what it means to question yourself.” Gabriel played with the glass, as the foam inside, placed on the golden liquid, shook.

It was so quiet, I heard the sound of it all. Even though this was supposed to be a live house. Gabriel is perfect. Sure enough, he can’t see through everything, but I can tell he’s very harsh on himself when he realizes he is in the wrong. But even so, I can’t see how he would have changed his mind and invited Nelina into his band.

“You don’t seem too satisfied. And I don’t blame you. However, did you ever think of it this way? Maybe you’re misunderstanding her? Like I have. *Don’t you think?*”

Misunderstand? I...Nelina?

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t tell you any more than that.”

“Why?”

“Another correct question. However, you lack the necessary thought right now. You should start thinking about why I can’t tell you.”

Because it’s not something I should know of...but that was ridiculous, so I shook my head.

“Anyway, Nelina will be handling some of the songs for the new project. *Understand?*”

Gabriel remained as calm as always. And...I did understand. But understanding and agreeing were two different things. However, I figured he wouldn’t tell me any more than this, so I got off [The Ark]. Nowhere to go, I walked down the streets beneath the illumination. Hearing what Gabriel had to say, I was even more confused. How did Nelina manage to twist her hands around Gabriel’s neck? No, even before that...who is she, even?

When I came to Bristol, I was like a lost child. Not knowing where to go, I was always confused. And yet, Nelina is different. She seemed like she was unable to do anything on her own, and yet she had everything under her palm already. She even scored the seat of the vocalist. I’m sure it’s not the body language she talked about, but I also have no idea how she achieved it. And then there’s what Gabriel said.

Am I really misunderstanding Nelina? She’s selfish, reckless, greedy, and aggressively goes against anything she doesn’t like. And at the same time, her voice is utterly beautiful. Terrifyingly so, even. But, I was reminded of Boudicia. Before I found out that she was the Ghost of Bristol, before I even heard that term, I met Boudicia. And even after I learned that she was the Ghost, I’ve seen her show anger, laughter, and tears, all close by. What if it was the opposite?

How much of Nelina...is actually Nelina? Why is she so infatuated

with music? But before I could dive into this thought, my phone made a noise to tell me of a message. It originated from JF sending me a blog article without any comment. It was the blog for **Queen Bear's Revenge**. I knew they'd kept a blog for a while now. But rather than it being a personal blog owned by one person, it revolved around advertisements and official statements, so it wasn't being updated regularly.

Everything important regarding the crew, you could find there... written by Lara. I checked the title. It was kept short, but in this context, three words held a greater impact than any paragraph. ***This is war***—I quickly opened the blog and read the rest of the post.

Let me start by prefacing this. Just like most of us writers, I love music. Whenever I write graffiti, I listen to Massive Attack's [Mezzanine], and I lost count of how many times I replayed Porthishead's [Dummy]. That's why I don't want to make this agenda against music itself. Unlike a certain someone, I won't generalize against a concept. However, I can't stay quiet, either. We've fought this whole time. The history of graffiti reflects the history of how Bristol's citizens fought against the unreasonable. And yes, I cannot disagree that it ended up in vandalism at times. However, as we are now experiencing such a massive force coming to crush us, we can't choose our methods. If we wait until it's our turn to state our opinion, it'll be too late. That's why we've continued to put our feelings into art, conveying them onto the walls. Our voices...our screams and wishes...that's the only place where we can let them out. It's our only weapon to protect ourselves.

I'm sure you remember the graffiti the Ghost of Bristol wrote inside the art museum: "Here I'm allowed everything all of the time." Not too long ago...Bristol's graffiti, and our culture, had been purged from the Bearpit and killed by the city council. The reason we could stop their merciless rampage was that we stood against them. We fought, and we rebelled. We cannot lose against those who threaten us. Graffiti exists for that reason... and so do we. Here, we are allowed everything all the time. To put out our chests and say that. And we won't let anybody say that what we do is wrong.

I heard there will be a live concert on the night of Christmas at the ship, right? Then we'll arrive with one of our own. A friend of mine was generous enough to sponsor an abandoned ship. And we'll do a live painting there. The entire ship will be buried by graffiti. At the same time...at the same time. We won't accept some one-sided announcement. So take this as a message of our own:

We don't want to be part of your ark that only accepts chosen animals. The stormy and endless sea is our true home. Because Bristol...is the town where the great pirate Blackbeard was born. That's right—This is war. Let's decide who should survive.

Advertisement

Chapter 4: “Weather Storm”

The following day, rumors about Gabriel and Lara’s fight had already spread all throughout the town. Graffiti and music—both part of Bristol’s culture. They should be complimenting each other, not standing on opposite sides. That’s why many voices from both writers and concert halls spoke against this fight. However, the citizens steadily moved toward a stronger anti-graffiti sentiment. Back during the purge of the Bearpit, the city council was the moving force. But this time, things were different. Many held dissatisfaction and distrust toward graffiti. And some had a good right to do so, as well.

Hence, a lot of this judgment and blame fell onto Lara, who stood at the front lines. Support from graffiti writers and concert halls on one side, whereas the general public was speaking against her intentions. And that wasn’t all. The **Queen Bear’s Revenge** as a whole ended up in a difficult position. The more the days passed, more of their members suffered attacks from violent citizens, and there were even rumors that some people fought back. The graffiti on the walls was targeted by spray or paint bullets, too. It’s like the whole town was shrouded in an angry and aggressive mood. In general, Bristol had very vocal inhabitants, clearly speaking against what they deemed wrong. And this time, the flawed culture just so happened to be graffiti. Amidst all that, Gabriel’s response to Lara’s declaration spoke for itself.

To Queen Bear’s Revenge—

We accept your challenge. On that day, it’ll become clear just who has the support of the citizens. And the loser will leave Bristol to never return. How does that sound?

In return, Lara’s response was just as simple.

Very well. Let the war begin—

That was all it said in the blog, and yet each and every single reader knew what she was referring to. Graffiti or music? Everyone in town was discussing that, too. And I myself stood on an extremely complicated stage. I don't agree that graffiti should be removed from this town. However, I'm currently pairing with the music, as I am a member of [New Announcement]. And if [New Announcement] were to lose, what will happen to me?

The members of the band have been kept secret so far. The plan was to do the unveiling on Christmas the day itself. However, I still have to go up on the stage to play. Saying that I was forced into this and that I'm unrelated won't cut it. And the ones who aren't chosen by the public will have to leave Bristol and never return. The details in regard to that were never made clear. So, there was no guarantee I'd actually lose my place here in Bristol. But thinking about it, even in the field of graffiti, there were no accurate parameters to decide which work was harder to write, or which looked objectively better. And yet, despite its vagueness, if the citizens...if the community makes its decision, there's no reverting it.

And I also remembered the violent actions toward the graffiti writers in this town that had become numerous lately. It's not just someone else's problem anymore. I could see myself just stopping my year abroad to then return to Japan. For the first time since my arrival, I was genuinely scared of Bristol. And even despite all of that, the only thing that was consistently on my mind—was her face. I still haven't talked with Boudicia since that day. And since she hasn't come to the 8-Bit World at all, I haven't even seen her. Will everything just end... like this? Sure, everything might return to how things were before. Normally, I wouldn't have ever come to Bristol.

So, I'll just go back to Japan, and play the guitar with Nelina. In a sense, my reason for coming to Bristol may have been wrong anyway. But even as I was unable to come up with my answer, the rehearsals at [New Announcement] continued. After I finished the guitar part for the tracks, Gabriel brought Nelina, JF, and me together for practice. His songs felt like a minute clock. The small components and parts came together, ticking as time progressed, creating a stable rhythm in the process. And Gabriel's singing plus piano matched that with its violent tone.

Compared to that, JF's DJ work was much more serene. Gabriel's songs didn't bother caring about the people who listened. What mattered was the beauty of it, or the lack thereof. Contrary, JF wanted his music to reach other people. It's like he was brewing coffee. He carefully measured the amount, and progressed within the time frame, carefully brewing it. All of that was done accordingly, but the final goal was still to have the person drinking the coffee enjoy themselves. This care, warmth, and kindness are what became apparent in his music.

Surprisingly enough, Nelina had changed quite a bit. Her voice was translucent but at the same time thick and strong, only to then slowly and minutely change into a sharp and tasteful high tone. Gabriel was right when he said I'd see for myself at the practice. I don't know this person who can create such a voice. Honestly speaking, I didn't see my guitar being of any need in this music. The guitar is far from a correct musical instrument. It creates twisted noise, and if I press on the strings, it corrupts the pitch. Compared to the sound that was created inside a computer, clean and proper, it felt rough and dirty.

When I asked Gabriel about that, he once again said that the most important part is the question. I asked if it wasn't better to remove the guitar from this music, but that apparently wasn't a good question. Now that I'm allowed to participate in this band, and told to play here, then the correct question would be: Why is the guitar necessary here? Gabriel called it something fervent that only the guitar can create. Correctness, ideals, purity, but also sadness that it can't go that way...Wanting to be something, but unable to achieve that...like it was destiny. If so...

I used the fuzz effect and deeply twisted the sounds of my guitar to the utmost limit. Through this, the tone of the guitar can turn into a wind instrument, like a saxophone, as it creates long notes. I matched with the root music of black musicians that Gabriel explicitly paid attention to while adding noises that only the guitar could make. Just by touching the strings a bit, the electric waves reached the speakers to create almost an explosive noise. The vibrations hit you right in the face.

Hearing this for the first time, Gabriel's eyebrow moved up once, but he never touched upon it again, and we just kept on practicing the

other songs. But, since Gabriel was generally very sparse with his expressions, even that faint movement could be immense affirmation in a way. And yet, it tore me apart. Each time a rehearsal ended, when I should be feeling happy that the distance between us closed for a bit, it was like my chest was being grabbed. Which side...am I supposed to take? Is it really the correct choice for me to follow my music? This feeling of discomfort continued to grow inside of me, when—

A message came in. From Lara, no less. It said that [Z] appeared. Once the rehearsal of that day ended, I quickly rushed to the Bearpit. I could see her trademark beryl green shake from a distance.

“Lara-san, I heard [Z] was active again?”

When Lara turned around, I could see the graffiti behind her at the same time—That’s right, it was graffiti. In the center, I could see the familiar lighting, so I figured this must be [Z]’s work. The shape is the exact same as we were used to. However, this lighting wasn’t created using a high-pressure washer. Rather, it was written on the wall with silver spray paint. And around that were several letters, which seemed unarranged and nonsensical before, but upon closer look, it was a sentence. The thick letters were written in red, then turning green to go vertical, changing to purple, and blue, as they received graduation, and finally ending in a white flame. And the message written on there said: ***Graffiti is over.***

The message written there was definitely created by a graffiti writer. And it was of high quality, too. You could almost feel the animosity from it.

“Yoshi, you’re here. Well...it’s just as you can see,” Lara muttered as she looked up at the graffiti.

I still struggled to believe it...That [Z] is a graffiti writer.

“This is...just normal graffiti, right?”

“Yes, that it is...”

Her voice grew weaker by the end until her body tipped sideways. I

barely managed to reach my hands and stop her fall. Realizing how light and fragile her body was, I was shocked.

“Are you okay?”

Lara quickly regained her balance, rubbing her eyes.

“I’m just running low on sleep. For this year’s Christmas, I have to prepare quite a lot, after all.”

Looking at her pale face, it couldn’t just be her running low on sleep, but she clearly wouldn’t let me press her on that.

“More importantly, did you meet Boo?”

When her name popped up, I could feel my body growing tense.

“...No. Why?”

“I contacted her, but got no response.”

“I haven’t met her myself.”

We haven’t even run into each other since that incident. And since she didn’t respond to Lara’s message either, I grew worried.

“...I don’t like where this is going.” She must have seen how worried I looked because she spoke up. “Graffiti is slowly turning into vandalism in the eyes of the citizens. But we need something definitive to turn that around and raise our evaluation.”

Something definitive...I immediately thought Boudicia’s...of the graffiti the Ghost of Bristol created.

“The graffiti in the art museum changed the flow of the town. Everyone’s waiting for the Ghost to act. And many writers would be on board if the Ghost joined our cause.”

It’s true. That day, everything changed. *Here I’m allowed everything all of the time.* This message alone changed the tide greatly. Everyone who had felt oppressed and rejected must have been...saved by this. But now, Boudicia is nowhere to be seen.

“And yet...I can’t tell Boo to write.”

“Lara-san...”

“She could finally write again...Saying she’d only write for her own sake. And I understand the weight on her left hand must be immense because of that.”

Learning that Lara was thinking the same thing as me, I felt relieved. That I’m not the only one who is aware of Boudicia’s problems. And that should be a good thing for her.

“Since I’m not getting a response, she must not be prepared yet. Her feelings, I mean...But, I can’t just rely on Boo. I have to fight myself.”

Surely, that was the correct decision. But could Lara’s fragile shoulders...really carry the weight that fell from Boudicia’s left hand? I didn’t respond and looked up at the graffiti when Peni stepped outside the green bus. But, JF was nowhere to be seen.

“Ah, Peni-san.”

“I had no idea that [Z] was a writer. What...what betrayal! Who did this?!”

[Z] is someone who can write graffiti. That possibility wasn’t something we hadn’t considered, but with the revelation hitting us in the face like this, it was more than shocking. Peni cursed some more at [Z] when he eventually dropped his shoulders.

“Graffiti is being hurt more and more...People are bad-mouthing the Captain...and I don’t know what to do...”

Queen Bear’s Revenge—The graffiti culture that was protected by Lara, Peni, JF, and Boudicia—was almost struck down by the ax of the police. And this time, it was decaying because of sickness from within. It’s like their immunity was being eaten up, as allergies and diseases came crawling in. How could this have happened?

“Is this really [Z]’s work?” I asked.

This graffiti is different from what happened before. It wasn’t a

reverse graffiti, but a forward one...Well, I don't know if that term exists, but I didn't understand the reason why [Z] suddenly changed his methods. In fact, it would probably be easy to imagine that someone other than [Z] did this. Even I could tell that this was genuine graffiti, written with clear passion behind it. I don't know what emotions the writer packed into their words of "Graffiti is over," but the way the flames were created, it wasn't anything lackluster.

"There's no mistaking it," Lara declared without hesitation.
"Whatever the case, I have to overwrite this. Really, what a pain..."
"What do you...?"

Does she...already know who [Z] is? Lara grabbed a ladder from the corner of the plaza, climbed up on it, and began spraying the spray paint from the top. I thought she'd just put completely new graffiti over it, but Lara didn't do that. She didn't just fill the entire wall but instead turned the lighting and burning letters into a painting. Watching over this for a while, I could finally see what she was drawing—A flower. Pink, green, and purple...More and more flowers came sprouting from the wall that was ripped to shreds by the lighting. I see, this is one way of doing it.

The scenery I witnessed was different from the graffiti battle I had always envisioned. It wasn't a battle to the death like you both held knives at each other's throats. Lara is always brave, proudly carrying the name of the Captain. And her determination to not give up was worthy of carrying the Pirates under her banner. But, that's not just it. She stood up, raised her voice, and fought...to protect something.

I could hear the sound of spray paint gushing out of the can, like a breeze running along the prairie. And during that interval, it felt like I could hear Lara's words. "We have to fight what stands in our way. However, we aren't the enemy. Isn't that right? It'll be fine."

I gasped. As Lara continued to move the spray can, it felt like I could see [Z]'s real face for a moment. Of course, that was just my intuition. I don't have enough proof yet, and I haven't fully organized my thoughts. But, if that was the case, then...

“Look, someone’s writing graffiti again.”

An unfamiliar voice interrupted my thoughts. Turning around, I saw a group of three presumably university students, passing by the Bearpit as they pointed at Lara.

“Isn’t that someone from **Queen Bear’s Revenge**? Her hair color is something else.”

“So then she’s the *root of all evil*, right?”

“Stop sullyng our town!”

“Bristol doesn’t belong to you!”

I didn’t miss the split second when Lara’s expression grew twisted—I want to live here. I was reminded of her words when everything clicked. Boudicia wrote for her own sake. Nelina is the same. She sings to obtain the things she wants. Gabriel is creating music to bring life to the beauty and righteousness he believed in. However, Lara never once wrote for her own good. She didn’t ever say that *Bristol is ours*. No, *we are Bristol*, she said. She never wrote to make this place her own. She wanted to make it a better place. To ensure that flowers would grow from the tree that was struck by lightning. To make sure she could live in Bristol.

...But, for whose sake did I make my music? Nelina and Gabriel may have been right after all. That I have no soul...that I’m empty. But, that didn’t mean I could forgive that.

“Please stop.”

I subconsciously moved before the group of three. They apparently didn’t expect me to speak up, as they seemed flustered for a moment. However, this only lasted for a moment.

“Don’t go teaming up now, you nasty writers.”

“I’m not a writer. But...I’m sure you must have something you’re passionate about, right? Something you love more than anything else.”

I won't argue that graffiti is always correct. However, the feelings of caring for someone else and putting them into shape...are not wrong.

"Huh? You're a criminal, what are you acting all cool now."

"You just don't get it!" Peni, who had been listening in silence as he bit his lip, now joined me.

"Yikes, look at him."

"Go film this!"

"Call the police right now."

"You don't know how desperate the Captain is...how much she cares for this town...You don't know a damn thing, so don't talk like you're some know-it-alls!" Peni howled.

"Sh-Shut up! You should get locked up!"

One of the people was overwhelmed by rage and anger, taking out a plastic bottle from his backpack and throwing it. I could see this bottle flying through the air in slow motion. Heavy, as it was filled with water, it slammed into the leg of the ladder.

"Ah..." A faint voice that didn't even turn into a scream escaped Lara's lips.

The ladder tipped.

"Captain!"



Peni started running and reached for Lara with his hands. However, he didn't make it in time. Her bluish-green hair danced in the air, as only her head fell down. The ladder crashed into the ground and created a loud sound. So oppressively loud, it drowned out Lara slamming down shortly after.

“Lara-san!”

I quickly ran over to her, trying to raise her body—When I felt something wet on my hands. I looked down, but all I could see was red. At first, I thought it was spray paint. But in the end, it was just the bare minimum effort to run away from the reality that unfolded in front of me. There's no way the paint would end up on my hands like this.

“Lara-san...Lara-san!”

No response came. I shook her shoulders, even though I knew I shouldn't, but my knowledge wasn't helping me much right now. I looked around, spotting Peni screaming something into a phone. The other citizens had long vanished. Nobody was here to help. Unable to do anything, I just gazed into Lara's eyes. They were open, reflecting the Bristol sky within them.

*

The UK has a system called the NHS—The National Health Service. All citizens receive free medical treatment. It was the ideal system, in a way. However, society always shapes the ideal as reality changes. And with this free service, the patients filled the hospital, and even calling a GP—a General Practitioner—for a reservation could take weeks or even a month. Especially now that we were nearing the end of the year. That's why the *ambulance* doesn't immediately come running here in the UK.

I didn't know how much time had passed since Peni screamed into the phone. Each passing second, each minute the ambulance hadn't come, felt like an hour. Eventually, they arrived to take Lara into their yellow and green car and drive off. As Peni joined Lara inside, I was left behind, sitting on my knees. I wanted to put my hands on the ground to push myself up, only to realize my hands were red from the blood. It had dried now, not going off no matter how much I rubbed. On staggering feet, I returned to my dorm, closed the door, and washed my hands in the bathroom.

Crimson red water ran down the otherwise white sink, slowly turning into a faint pink. It reminded me of the flower Lara had drawn. Peni contacted me the next day. And honestly, I didn't even remember what I did until that phone call came. I just carried my legs to the

hospital. Excluding my initial visit for the papers, this was my first time coming to the hospital in Bristol, so I was relieved to see Peni waiting for me at the front. I followed him and entered the hospital room. On the way, I saw the sign on the outside of the door, stating “Major Treatment,” which made my body stiffen up. Then, we reached the bed on which Lara was laying.

The hospital room itself was a bit messy, but it wasn’t too different from what I was used to in Japan. There was a gauze next to Lara’s forehead, but other than that, she slept peacefully. But because her face was so pale, I even worried if she was still breathing.

“Since she hit her head, they’ll be doing the tests after this...but she doesn’t seem to be in any imminent danger,” Peni said and sat down next to the bed.

The small stool screamed in agony as it tried to deal with Peni’s weight.

“Is...that so. Thank god.” I sighed in relief, and then looked at Lara again.

Seeing her sleep on the bed, the first thing that came to her mind was the fact she was still a young girl. I was always taken aback by her pressure and presence, but now I realized that such a tender girl carried the weight of Bristol’s graffiti.

“She’s sleeping right now. I think it’s more because of how tired she was than any injury.”

“Then I’ll be leaving again. I just wanted to check on her once.”

Right as I turned my back toward the bed, I heard stomping footsteps, and a familiar face came storming inside the room.

“Lara! You okay?!”

“Boo-san.”

“Ah...Yoshi.”

We ended up closer than we expected, so we awkwardly averted our

faces.

“Mm...Yoshi, Boo. You came?”

I heard a weak voice, to which I turned around, seeing Lara raise her heavy body. Her bluish-green hair fell down onto her shoulders. This was the first time I saw her with her hair undone.

“I’m sorry. We didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“Are you okay?!”

“Yes. Though the inside of my head feels like the Wills Memorial Building’s bell is ringing.”

“You’re clearly not okay!”

She wasn’t acting like you normally would around an injured person, but that just showed how worried she was.

“I’m sorry that I made you worry.”

“Captain...I thought you were gonna die...”

“Haha, I won’t die even if you cut off my head. There are still many more things I have to do.”

Peni looked close to breaking out in tears. Lara’s response was weak and fragile, but deep down, her determination hadn’t wavered.

“Captain.”

The next person who showed up in the room was a tall man with a beard. His expression made it seem like the end of the world was upon us.

“JF-san...”

Right as I called out to him, Boudicia was fuming.

“How dare you come here.” She moved toward him, boiling with anger but calmly nonetheless. “Say something, you giraffe bastard.”

That's right, Boudicia must have realized...And so did Lara, probably.

"JF-san...You are [Z], right?"

I heard a rummaging sound. Turning over, I saw Peni fall off his stool.

"Yoshi, I really like you, but there are some things you can't say! There's no way that JF is the one who did this! Right, Captain?!" Peni jumped up and closed in on me, then glanced at Lara.

However, she looked away and didn't say a thing. That attitude alone spoke more than enough.

"That...That has to be a lie! JF, you couldn't have betrayed us, right?!"

JF sighed once and closed his eyes. Then, as if he made up his determination, he opened them again.

"No, it's the truth. I'm [Z]."

"Why?! We were always together!"

"...I just never told you. I'm part of Gabriel's band," he said and glanced at me.

"Wha..."

"And I'll take Gabriel's side. We're over, Peni."

"But...we joined the Captain's crew together...And you said that we should start a restaurant...because my burrito was so good...and when the police came, we tried to protect the Bearpit together!" Peni closed in on JF. "Without your coffee...How could I sell my burritos from now on...?!"

"...Hell do I know. It's not my problem anymore."

"But!"

The one who interrupted their exchange was none other than Lara.

“...JF, are you serious about this?”

“Yeah, Captain. It’s the end of the line. *Graffiti is over*. To me, as well as to this city.” JF continued. “I realized that Gabriel is *right* and graffiti is *wrong*. Writing on the city’s walls is madness. Think about it. Public places, even other people’s buildings, don’t belong to us, yet we continue to write. We can’t hurt them just as we please. And once I realized that, it was all easy.”

Nobody could return a word. Not because we had nothing to say. Rather, it was utterly unbelievable that these words came from someone like JF. And then...

“That’s why you erased our graffiti?”

“Yeah. That’s right. It’s *punishment!*”

Only Lara looked straight at JF.

“See you guys never. I’m done spending time with barbaric folks like you.” JF headed for the door, his sneakers squeaking.

“If that’s all that you want to say...” The one who called out to him once more was Lara. “Then...why did you write that graffiti?”

JF’s legs stopped. And Lara continued.

“If you truly believe that graffiti is wrong. That’s over for us. Then...” She didn’t give JF a chance to say anything, continuously putting pressure. “...Why did you write that graffiti?”

JF’s movement stopped completely. And then, he turned around. It was impossible for me to unravel the countless emotions that filled his expression. But it all mixed to create one impression—Pain.

“...I’m always half-baked when it comes to everything. Be it music or graffiti, I never put my life on the line for it. I kept making excuses that, even if one came crashing down, I could always fall back on the other. But now, I saw this as a chance. A moment that forced me to pick one side.” He formed a fist, grasping the shirt he was wearing.

Almost like he wanted to suppress the pain his chest experienced.

“I decided to go with music, and opted out of graffiti...But, I wanted to go all out at least once.”

“Then you should have told me...”

“I...! I wanted to have a serious match with you!”

His calm voice had wandered off somewhere, changing into a pleading scream.

“I always admired you, Captain. And you gotta be serious. Otherwise, I can never give up. If I can’t say I clashed with you at least once... Then I can’t take a step forward! Even...Even if I just lose in the end!”

Art never lies. I don’t know much about graffiti still, but it’s the case with music. Even if you try to keep it secret, the feelings you stored away in the depths of your work, it always shines through. So, even if he asked Lara for a duel with all her might, there’s a good chance that she subconsciously would have held back for his sake.

“That’s why I pretended to be [Z], hurting all the graffiti in the city. While aiming for our crew’s graffiti in particular. Because I knew you’d move, then. No, you would have to. So if I were to challenge you to a graffiti battle under the pseudonym of [Z], you would definitely take me seriously. Even if you were aware that it was me.”

“Why did you have to go that far?! It makes no sense! The Captain almost died!”

“I never expected you to understand.”

“JF! Are you really okay with this?!”

“Shut up! *Graffiti is over!* I’m not one of your allies anymore!”

“...Come here.”

As the silence grew unbearable in the room, Lara’s voice acted like a ray shining through the curtains. JF thought for a moment and then stood next to Lara’s bed.

“Have a seat.”

JF bent his tall body and sat down on the stool Lara pointed at.

“Look at me.”

After a moment’s hesitation, JF raised his head.

“I had no idea it was you. Not until I saw that graffiti.” Lara looked straight at JF. “But...” She leaned forward, opening her arms. “It’s okay. You don’t have to blame yourself like that.”

I could see the exact moment the ice began to melt. And the melted ice then turned into tears that fell to the ground.

“Ugh...I...I...”

Lara’s arms wrapped around JF, gently rubbing his head.

“I’m a writer, so...If I was seen with Gabriel, then **Queen Bear’s Revenge** would suffer. That’s why I thought I needed to quit quickly...But I couldn’t bring myself to, so...I wanted to write one last graffiti at the very end...”

“Haha, you’re as clumsy as always,” Lara’s voice was gentle like she accepted all sin.

“I thought that, once everything was over, it’d be okay if I was the only one...But...I didn’t want things to escalate like this...”

I remembered what JF told me before. I had to choose who to side with. Ruining the graffiti of the comrades he’s been with all this time must have required tremendous determination. Because doing that far would mean he could never return to this side. That this was his turning point. And if he hadn’t cornered himself this much, he probably would not have been able to make that decision. I don’t know if that was the right choice or not. But at the very least, JF made a decision. But what about me? Whose side will I take? And how should I proceed? Could I...really make a decision?

“JF...Now that things have gotten this far, I cannot leave you with **Queen Bear’s Revenge**, understand?” Lara placed one hand on JF’s

body as she slowly moved away.

“...I was prepared for that from the start.”

“Just like you said, you’re risking everyone’s safety if you were to come and go as you pleased. But...you’re serious about your music, too, right?”

JF silently nodded.

“Then...as your Captain, I must banish you from our crew. You are no longer a member of **Queen Bear’s Revenge**.”

“Aye aye, Captain.”

“And once everything is over...Come back, okay?” Lara said and embraced JF once more.

Like a broken dam, like a child that was scolded by its parents, JF broke down crying. And so did Peni next to them. It almost looked like they were a family, as they all hugged each other. Lara then glanced at me, giving me a wink. Unlike her usual prowess and energy, she showed me another kind of gentle strength.

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Shortly after, we left the hospital. Now that December had arrived, Bristol had gotten worryingly cold at night. The breath leaving my mouth was white, melting into the sky.

“Boo-san, you knew that JF was [Z]?”

Without anywhere in particular to go, we just walked next to each other, when I asked that question.

“I figured it out when I saw his graffiti. Just like Lara, probably. And that’s why she tried to earnestly overwrite it...Dang it, all of them are so uptight.”

I realized I hadn’t heard her voice for a long time. I even doubted for a moment if it really was her. Looking over at her, the breath leaving her mouth was just as white as mine. It made me realize that we

really walked next to each other. After we hadn't talked for so long, I thought we'd grown more distant, but now that we're together like this, it was almost like there was never any pause.

"JF-san really loves graffiti, doesn't he?"

"Yeah...You're right."

"It made me think. If I could face my music with the same vigor as him."

JF and I stand on the same stage. Lara and Gabriel...Since we decided to be part of the band, we have to decide on which side we stand. Though, since JF is a proper writer himself, he must have it a lot harder than me. And even so, he decided. He hurt his own allies' works, challenged his own respected Captain, and chose to stand with the music. And still, Lara told him to come back. However, there's something even more troublesome than that. Because the loser will have to leave the town. It was the rule of these Christmas Wars. If so...if [New Announcement] were to win, then there was no graffiti crew to come back to. Even so, JF nodded. And once that day comes, they'll fight with everything they have.

It already surpassed the question of siding with graffiti or music, and deciding who was the winner. It meant to stay true to your soul until it burned out. They all knew that this was what mattered the most. Results were nothing but results. But...I can't reach that same place. I stand in the middle between these two extremes. I understand what Lara is saying, but I don't think that Gabriel is in the wrong. I don't agree that all graffiti should vanish, but I can't cast aside the music I've played all this time—And then there's Boudicia and Nelina.

I thought that far, only to shake my head to erase their images from my mind. This wasn't the problem. This wasn't the focus. It shouldn't be. Or...is it?

"...Boo-san, what are you doing on Christmas?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Well...Lara-san wished for you to write, so I was wondering."

I tried to stop my thought process and asked Boudicia instead. She will have to make a choice, too. And I wanted to hear her answer.

“Aw, geez. That’s what you meant.”

“Well, I was just curious.”

Her odd response had me wondering what exactly she expected, but I ignored that. I just needed to know what answer she should bring.

“...She never thinks, huh? She doesn’t consider that she can’t do it, or that it’s too much for her.”

“She reached her limit, surely. I’m glad she got to rest up, even though the circumstances aren’t what I wished them to be.”

She stood at the front lines, under the full assault of all the blame, and continued to overwrite despite that. Eventually, she encountered an accident and barely made it through it unscathed. Surely, she’ll continue to write after this. Because she said she wanted to live here. And yet, she almost died in this city. Not to mention that her fight isn’t over...No, it hadn’t even begun. Without the Captain on Christmas, **Queen Bear’s Revenge** won’t act. Lara’s fate is still within stormy weather.

“...I should have helped her. She’s been cornered to such a level because I didn’t do a thing.”

“Boo-san...”

“But, my left hand still isn’t perfect. I don’t see me winning at all. And if...if I write and her crew loses...how should I even face Lara after that?” Boudicia stopped in her tracks, looking at her left hand.

Seeing her like that, I gasped. While I was doing nothing at all, she had already made up her mind. She will write for the sake of Bristol. And this is what would equal writing for herself now. That wasn’t even the problem any longer. Rather, was she strong enough to carry Bristol’s graffiti with her own left hand? And did she have the courage to see the end? The reason her cheeks turned red and nose scuffy probably wasn’t just because of the cold. I remembered her first left-handed graffiti, which was sliced to pieces by [Z]. And she

said it mattered so much because I watched.

If I accepted and believed in these words...then is there something that I could do to help her? Maybe...I could quit playing music? And I'll stay by her side as she writes graffiti. We'd enter the same boat. Is there... a possible future like that? I reached for Boudicia's quivering left hand with my own.

"Ah, look!"

That moment, Boudicia's head shot up.

"It's a Christmas market! Let's go, let's go!" Boudicia started running as she turned toward me.

I looked at my hand, still mid-air, and showed a wry smile. This isn't good. I shouldn't rely on her left hand like this. Funny enough, Boudicia seemed like she had forgotten about everything we talked about and just looked around the Christmas market in awe. What she carried was already heavy enough. And I cannot be the support to carry even half of that. So at least, I should handle my own fate and deal with my own problems.

I dashed after Boudicia and entered the Christmas market, which seemed to possess the strength to warm my heart. The stalls all shone brightly with Christmas lights. They all sold Christmas goods wherever you looked, even going so far as to offer soap or bread.

"I'm feeling hungry. I wanna eat something." Boudicia said and pointed at a billboard that said 'Churros.'

"So you eat food other than meat?"

"Don't go talking like I'm some *wild animal*!"

Seeing her innocent expression, all the worries filling my mind suddenly were blown away. But then I remembered her vape, and how it had a vanilla taste, so maybe she was into sweet stuff, too. We each bought a portion of churros and ate them as we walked. When I looked over at her, she had white powder stuck to her mouth, which made me burst out laughing.

“You have sugar stuck to your mouth.”

“Mm!”

Boudicia frantically wiped her mouth with her hoodie’s sleeve. Naturally, this made the sleeve turn white instead. Yet, she continued to eat, so I looked after her clothes. She was like a small child that needed a lot of attention. And with our shoulders next to each other, we continued to walk through the market.

“I’ve never seen something like this in Japan. It feels like...the real deal.”

“But you guys have Christmas too, right?”

“Well...It’s similar to this, but...it feels a lot more fabricated.”

I remembered the LED lights of white and green everywhere. Unlike the clean and proper feeling of Japan’s lights, the decorations in Bristol felt more familial.

“So, is Santa Claus visiting you guys, too?”

“Sure does. I got a present, too, although I don’t remember what it was. It was probably some game.”

“You were a child before? That’s so *weird*.”

“Everybody was a child at some point. It’s not weird at all.”

“I can’t even imagine you as some small kiddo.”

“I haven’t changed much since then. Except I was a bit overweight then.”

Hearing that, Boudicia burst out laughing.

“For real? No way! Now I so wanna see that!”

“Since I spent most of my time playing games, I didn’t get much exercise. Over time, I just changed into my current shape, though. How was Christmas for you, Boo-san?”

“Mm...My parents were always busy. Mom was a professor over at Bristol University, and it was all research here, research there with her.”

Oh, huh. I had no idea. That’s an unexpected connection.

“Wait, is she still teaching now? Maybe I got her in one of my classes...”

“She passed away because of an accident when I was young.”

I immediately regretted asking that question.

“...I’m sorry.”

“Don’t sweat it. It’s been ages since then. That’s why I was with my grandma...But she was a teacher, too, so she was pretty strict. And everything just annoyed me, so...nothing better to do, I picked fights on the street.” Her long eyelashes hid her blue eyes. “And after Aeon taught me graffiti, that’s all I’ve been doing. Grandma just called me a criminal, and since I didn’t wanna go home, I just lived on the street.”

In my head, I could see Boudicia as a teenager. Always injured or hurt, filled with rage she was forced to bottle up, fighting random strangers...and forever alone. If I had met her during that time, would we have become friends? No, I doubt it. Back then, I was a shut-in, so I probably wouldn’t have been able to talk properly. Then again, I never would have imagined I’d spend my Christmas in Bristol like this in the far future.

But now, Boudicia is with me. It really is weird. People who had lived on opposite sides of the world now were in the same place, eating the same food. That made me think. Just where will I be next year? Will I meet someone completely new? Or—I looked at the girl standing next to me. Her blonde hair swayed in the wind, as the street light illuminated her blue and translucent eyes. Almost like she was Christmas itself.

“...That’s why...Well, I don’t really remember much about Christmas.” Boudicia stopped in her tracks, and I halted, too. “So,

um...”

She stood in front of me, her expression oddly serious. The genius graffiti writer or Ghost of Bristol I knew had vanished elsewhere. Instead, she was just a single girl who was scared of being hurt or being alone. How reassuring it could be if I just forget about everything and melt into the Christmas city at night. But, I don't have the right to accept whatever she is about to say. There is something more important than I need to tell her.

“Sorry Boo-san, but before that...I have to tell you something.”

“Mm, got it. *I'm all ears*,” she nodded and fixed her hoodie.

“Well, the thing is...”

The surrounding noise grew distant, as I could hear my own heart beating. Why did I...not tell her sooner? It would have been so easy if I got it over with in the beginning. Because I wouldn't have had to betray her like this. But, it's what I invited, so I have to say it.

“On Christmas day...”

I will be playing at [The Ark]. With Gabriel, that is—I had perfectly lined up my words, but before I could say them out loud, someone got the jump on me.

“You'll be with Nelina, right?”

For a moment, I didn't understand what happened. I traced Boudicia's frozen gaze, turning around as I heard a familiar voice. I already knew who it was. But, a part of me wanted to deny it nonetheless. This can't be possible, right?

“Nelina-san, how are you here?!”

“How? Because Nelina ran around looking for you! You didn't respond to any messages, so we were worried. You forgot about the rehearsal, right?”

“Ah...”

My head was full of Lara and that was going on, I completely erased that from my memory. Nelina's right, I had another rehearsal with [New Announcement] today. And this led me to curse my own foolishness.

"Nelina had a bad feeling about this. And look at that, she was right. What a shame, Stray Cat-chan. On Christmas, Yoshi will be doing a live concert with Nelina!" Her voice and body both clung to me like glue.

"Christmas? Fox, what are you talking about?"

"Boo-san, wait! You don't understand..."

"No, it's exactly as you think."

Nelina wasn't the only one standing there. These tall black and white clothes...I've never seen him outside the boat, and yet...

"So you are Gabriel...!"

"On Christmas day, Yoshi and I will perform at [The Ark]. Because he is my *instrument*. Isn't that right?"

"Because of your provocation, Lara was...!"

Boudicia stormed toward Gabriel, grabbing his collar. Surprisingly enough, Gabriel showed no resistance, simply bending his tall back.



“I came here just as Nelina told me, but you must be Yoshi’s *graffiti* friend. So *barbaric*.”

Gabriel didn’t flinch. He just opened his arms and shrugged.

“See, Yoshi. *Just like I said*. Their *essence* is *violence*.”

“Huh, should I show you some *true violence*, then?”

Boudicia put more strength into her grip, as his body shook gently.

“And your thinking is so shallow. Do as you like. I am a *weak* and *harmless* person. However, I am also *well-known*. See, everyone is watching?” Gabriel muttered, to which I and Boudicia looked around.

Many people stopped in their tracks or turned around to look at us.

“They’ll start taking pictures soon if you don’t stop. And in the current situation, they’ll all think one thing—That you are a graffiti writer. And it’ll be absolutely correct. *Isn’t it?*” Gabriel spoke with a calm tone, knowing full well that he had the upper hand. “Are you willing to let them know? The evilness of graffiti? That graffiti is *wrong?*”

I don’t want to admit it...but Gabriel is right. Even if we go rampant now, it’ll worsen the position that **Queen Bear’s Revenge** is in.

“...Boo-san, please let go.”

“Yoshi...”

“Please.”

Boudicia kept glaring at Gabriel as she let go of his collar.

“Yoshi, is what he said true?”

“It is.”

“Why...didn’t you tell me?”

“I tried telling you! Again and again!”

That was the truth...But at the same time, it was a lie. All I did was run away. And the repercussions of my own actions now came crashing down on me.

“...Whatever.”

She took a step away from me. And yet, it felt like she had completely shut me off.

“...Wasn’t my business, to begin with. You and I...You were always on their side. Sorry to get you involved in this mess. I was an idiot.”

“Please, wait!”

Her voice sounded like singular drops of water falling into a pond, I had no way to cheer her up. Words, feelings, and thoughts, they all slipped through my hands, sucked up by the darkness. And then, Boudicia turned her back toward me.

“Bye.”

As Boudicia walked away, Gabriel called out to her.

“If you happen to know the leader of **Queen Bear’s Revenge**, then please tell her one thing. On Christmas, your generation will end, and my generation will begin.”

Boudicia stopped but didn’t turn around. Once she vanished fully, it was just Nelina, satisfied beyond belief, the ever-calm Gabriel, and me...whose heart was crushed into a foreign and unrecognizable shape.

“...Yoshi, I happened to find you like this, but I can’t see myself being motivated for practice. Let’s meet again at [The Ark], okay?” Gabriel disappeared into the crowd again.

I couldn’t even look after him.

“So he said! Now you’re alone again, Yoshi.” Nelina whispered into my ears, which reverberated inside my empty head. “But it’s fine. Nelina will stay with you.”

“I’m not...”

“There’s a place Nelina wants to check out. Wanna come with?”

“No. Leave me alone.”

She tried to keep her voice wet and damp, trying to satisfy me. But I just tried to put a lid on all the dark feelings about to gush out of me.

“Hmm...Oh, well. Nelina will leave you alone for today, but she’ll contact you tomorrow!”

She moved away from me much quicker than I had assumed, as she turned around. She then skipped away and disappeared into the crowd. It felt like the whole world had left me alone.



Advertisement

Chapter 5: “What Your Soul Sings”

I don't even remember how exactly I made my way home. When I regained my senses, I was laying in my bed, and eventually, morning arrived. I thought about the previous night's incident. I had two choices. First, I could continue making music with Gabriel and Nelina. The second is to side with Lara, then save Boudicia, and offer myself to graffiti. And yet, I didn't choose either. That's why I received the natural conclusion when I ran out of time.

Such a simple answer it was, and yet I couldn't have been more foolish. And as I resented my own actions, I received a message on my phone. Subconsciously, I reached for it and checked. It was a message from Nelina. Oh yeah, she said she'd contact me. I opened the message, which had a location attached, only stating “Here.” I couldn't even motivate myself to put on my glasses, just staring at the message. I realized she was talking about Millenium Square.

Millenium Square is a large plaza located in the center of Bristol. It was a relatively new space amidst the already flourishing green and grassy areas, taken care of beautifully, and there was even a canal with flowing water. Honestly, I really didn't feel like going. I just wanted to roll around in bed and sleep. It's got nothing to do with me anymore, I thought and closed my eyes...

However, I'm not changing at all. Gabriel called me an *instrument*. At first, I thought he was just telling me to practice really hard and follow his orders. But now, it makes much more sense. When I was told I had no soul, I decided to run away. Not from Nelina in particular, but from facing my own music. I didn't stop making music because I was hurt. I was scared of being hurt from now on. Terrified that people would find out that my music has no soul. If I truly wanted to improve and make myself a better person...then I would

have asked right then and there. What exactly she meant by that.

Producing greater music than before—That was the one thing expected from an *instrument*, and I couldn't even fulfill that. I looked away from the truth in front of me, and ran away to protect myself. But of course, that's not good. I don't want to erase what I've experienced after coming to Bristol...or that I met her. What Boudicia inherited and accepted with her left hand, I should do the same. I got up from my bed, put on my glasses—and then, the world in front of me turned clearer.

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“Geez, you're late.”

When I arrived at the location I was sent, I managed to quickly spot Nelina walking around. She smiled as if nothing happened, not knowing of my determination.

“I'm perfectly on time. You're just here too early, Nelina-san,” I said and tried to speak with a deeper voice than usual.

However, this minuscule effort didn't faze Nelina much.

“Hehe, the face you make when you find Nelina is just so fun.”

“That makes no sense. So, what did you want to talk about?”

“Seriously...Rushing ahead like a child. Nelina wants to do that over there!” She said and pointed at a skating rink.

When she sent me the location for Millenium Square, I didn't give it much thought, but I kept it in the back of my mind. They'd periodically open up this place. The rectangular space was filled with ice, and people wearing all sorts of clothes danced on top of it. It felt like an exciting side activity for a few hours.

“Don't wanna,” I responded immediately.

I came here to talk with Nelina. I can't afford to waste time like this.

“Waaaaah?! But Nelina wants to try! Or what, you can't skate,

Yoshi?”

“That’s not the problem here!”

I am bad at moving my body. I never excelled at sports since I was young. I had some experience with skiing, but I never tried skating. And even if I had experience, I doubt I’d succeed in any way. And I don’t want Nelina to see when I embarrass myself...or more importantly, I doubt we can get any proper talking done like that.

“Hehe, how cute! You don’t need to be nervous, Nelina will hold your hand.”

“No thanks.”

“But Nelina can’t speak English, and she can’t skate on her own! If you don’t wanna join Nelina, then she’s got an idea up her sleeve!”

“You can’t threaten me anymore, Nelina-san.”

Or so I said, but hearing her following words, my determination was shattered into a thousand pieces.

“Hmph, then Nelina will just have to tell Gabriel who exactly the Ghost of Bristol really is!”

“...What did you just say?”

“You heard Nelina, right? She knows everything about you, after all.”

Nelina is right. I heard it perfectly. She’s gonna tell Gabriel who the Ghost is. I once again held my head in disbelief. Could such a thing even be possible? Boudicia and Gabriel clashed before, true enough, but he shouldn’t know that she’s the Ghost of Bristol. Only that she’s a violent graffiti writer friend of mine. I don’t know why Gabriel is so obsessed with the Ghost. But if he found out that it was Boudicia, things could escalate extremely quickly. I have to avoid this route at all costs.

And this had me thinking. Nelina knows that Boudicia is the Ghost of Bristol. Yet, she hasn’t informed Gabriel of this. Judging from their previous exchanges, she clearly doesn’t have any level of sympathy

for Boudicia, and this would be her easiest way to remove her from the picture. But, she didn't do so...to negotiate with me? Then there's a pretense to this...Namely, that I would protect Boudicia. And if she wasn't sure of that, she wouldn't use this as her card.

I looked at Nelina once more. She wasn't just some selfish princess. She knew exactly how to move everything in her favor. A personified greed for control, so to speak. And because she holds this card, she made it impossible for me to just go home. Then again, that doesn't change the fact I still needed to talk to her. The location may have changed, but not my goals. Plus, threatening me to stay here...it's hard to believe her only desire is to go ice skating with me.

As Nelina saw me head toward the white tent, she tagged after me with a satisfied smile. I paid seven pounds to the employee and told them my shoe size. I had 8, and Nelina's was the equivalent of 3. The shoes I got back were colored in a profound blue, almost like they attempted to wake me up, with the metal blade beneath the sole. I figured they'd just hand out regular string shoes, but the one pushed onto me reminded me of genuine skiing shoes.

I sat down on an open chair and put on my shoes. But when I stood up, I already realized how unstable I was. I couldn't even walk properly at times. Contrary to that, Nelina looked like she was back in her element, entering the rink. I chased after her and set food on the ice surface. I was worried I'd just tip over right away, but the long blade under my shoes acted as a fairly decent hold. That being said, moving forward was an entirely different story. If I step forward with my right leg, my left moves back. Same for the opposite, too.

While somehow managing to keep my legs standing, I reached a wall I could put my hand onto. As for Nelina, she had already mastered it, moving forward, backward, and twirling on the spot. It's like she danced through the air. I once again looked down at my wobbly feet. This is the difference between us. She's always free, acting as she likes. And I can't move forward, frozen in space. And this wasn't just related to skating.

"Hehe, like a fairy, right?"

She finished one round inside the rink and then stopped in front of

me with a smile. She spoke with a faint voice like we were the only two people who existed in this world.

“To me, you look more like the devil.”

Whenever I hear this voice of hers, my head just turns blank, my nerves spazzing out.

“A succubus? Aw, geez. Did Nelina seduce you?”

“Don’t play dumb now.”

Without even knowing how I feel—or so I’d like to say, but she’s probably more than aware. And then, she reached her hand out toward me.

“Come, Yoshi.”

It’s always been like this. Even when we played in front of Gabriel. I feel like I’m looking after Nelina, and yet she was the one grabbing my hand. And then she’d forcefully pull me along. Only at the core of it all does she actually let me choose. I made up my mind and took her hand. In response, Nelina showed a satisfied smile and started skating, pulling me after her. This time, she avoided any acrobatic maneuvers and instead focused on letting me skate along the outside. It’s the same when we’re playing music. The air feels so cold, and yet was burning up with heat.

“So?”

After a moment passed, Nelina opened her mouth.

“You wanted to ask Nelina something, right?”

“...Weren’t you the one who wanted to talk?”

“That’s true, but it felt like you had something on your mind.”

There were too many things for me to ask. But as the cup was full of water, overflowing with questions, I picked the next best one I could find.

“Why are we at a skating rink?”

“Because Nelina wanted to skate with you, Yoshi.”

“That can’t be all, right?”

“Then let Nelina rephrase that...It’s so that nobody would get in the way.”

She wasn’t poking fun at me as she usually would. Immediately after, it felt like the noise around me from the skating rink disappeared, turning into average white noise. I couldn’t look away from Nelina. It’s like it was just the two of us in the world.

“Nelina-san, do you know why I came here?”

“Because you were lonely.”

She said without a moment’s hesitation. It’s like the reality she assumed was the only correct one. But...was I really lonely?

“You’re always serious, Yoshi. For Nelina’s sake. You always match with her. You match her singing.”

Every time I played the guitar...Every time I made a new song, Nelina would always sing. I followed that route and my type of music naturally formed. I wasn’t just matching with her or anything...I followed her. Just like she pulled my hand right now.

“That’s why you were lonely. That’s why you were hurting. Because everything you’ve done felt like it was denied. Right?”

She saw through it all. I was being naive again. Even without saying anything, she understood everything. But if so...then that brought up another question.

“Nelina-san.”

“Yeah?”

“Back then, you said that my music has no soul, right?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you mean by that?”

“...You know, Nelina didn’t want to talk badly of you, Yoshi,” she sighed and closed her eyes.

The light of the illumination emphasized her long eyelashes. It was odd to see her stay quiet like that, but eventually, she continued with a clear and determined voice.

“Nelina told you when we first met, right? That she’s greedy. That she wants to have anything. And that she’d do whatever it takes.”

These words send me down a trip down memory lane. I heard of a band that was looking for a guitarist. That’s what started it all. I was innocent back then, only wanting to play the guitar. The feeling of my fingers moving by themselves after enough practice tickled my excitement. In that state, I didn’t have the motivation of playing in a band. But when I asked what the band was like, they all said the same thing: The vocalist is a messed up genius.

But that awakened my interest. I decided to check out the band because I was curious about who this vocalist is. And then, she sat at the meeting place, all by herself. I still remember wondering where the bassist and drummer were. But I figured the band moved as she ordered. And since I heard she was a genius, she probably called the shots—And yet, when I saw her face that day, she looked incredibly anxious. Except, this impression quickly vanished after we began talking for a while. She spoke with such passion that she could put the whole world into her palm.

If I had any talent. If my music could save people. When I nodded, she told me an epic poem about a world where she could sing as much as she likes. And I thought that musicians like her surely would make it big in today’s world. After we talked for a bit, I took a sip from my cafe late to calm myself down from overheating. And then she said: “Don’t make fun of Nelina.”

Right now, I can almost understand her feelings. But back then, I didn’t understand what she said, so I just responded: “You can do it,

right?” And before I realized it, I was working with her as the guitarist. The nightmare began, as I continued to try and fulfill all of her ridiculous requests. I was used like an eraser. Eventually, our band became popular, and even as we were right before a major debut, I could only watch it from an outsider’s perspective. I just did as I was told, and I considered it all to be Nelina’s success. I still feel that way. She’s still fighting...to make this world her own.

“Nelina can’t choose her methods. She’ll gulp down mud if need be. She’ll flirt with the producer. Show her fans void dreams. Pretend to be an idol. Obtain knowledge. Bring out the math. With more power comes more possibilities. Everyone will listen...and then the world will become Nelina’s.”

Thinking about it, I’ve never seen her talk about her ideals to someone other than that day. Instead, she uses her power to enter the minds of people with the bare minimum, using whatever methods are at her disposal. The stress resulting from that was then pointed at me. I had forgotten how fragile she could be. And how passionate she was when speaking of the future. Surely, Nelina has a hidden side to her. But, they belong to the same core. And I knew that very well. That being said, that didn’t mean that—

“That band doesn’t even need me.”

“What?!! Are you being serious right now?” Nelina let go of me, stopping in her tracks and turned toward me.

She grabbed my shoulder at a distance our foreheads were about to bump into each other.

“But, it’s true. After all...”

“Now listen.” Nelina grabbed my wrist.

Strongly, to the point it hurt. “How much apologizing do you think Nelina had to do after her guitarist ran away right before our major debut? It ended up as a major loss for the band’s career. And after not getting in contact at all, Nelina suddenly finds out you started studying abroad in the UK. Just adjusting the schedule to come here to Bristol was so much work! We could have made a whole new

album during this time!”

The reason I felt dizzy wasn't because of the shoes I wore. Rather, her logic made perfect sense. And, I had no idea I was so foolish. I only thought of myself, not considering other people. The selfish one wasn't Nelina, it was me.

“I'm sorry, Nelina-san. For all the trouble I caused.”

I apologized. Because that's all I could do.

“That's fine. Nelina isn't angry. That's the truth.”

Surprisingly enough, Nelina smiled. I could feel her grip on my arm getting weaker. She then ran her fingers along my arm. From my wrist to my elbow, onward to my shoulder. Even through my thick coat, I could feel her heat.

“Yoshi, you played for Nelina's sake. And she's thankful for that. But, that's not good enough. You should know that the world isn't so kind as to accept you if you don't work hard. Nelina can't obtain a world like this. If you don't pour your soul into your music, you can't reach the hearts of people.”

You have no soul. It felt like my music was being denied...and yet, they suddenly had a different ring to them than before.

“You're the only one who understood, Yoshi. You didn't laugh. Without Yoshi, Nelina can't believe herself. She doesn't see herself being able to do it. That's why she came all the way here to bring you back.”

The hand she had placed on my shoulder slowly moved down my back. The ice beneath my feet melted, as I slid towards Nelina.

“What do you want, Yoshi? What do you want to obtain? For what reason...do you make music?”

I could feel the warmth rise around me despite the cold air. It was like a furnace was right in front of me, my face felt hot. Before I realized it, Nelina had embraced me. Our bodies overlapped. I could feel her hands on my back, wishing that she couldn't hear my racing

heart. She then raised her head, looking up at me. The passion in her black eyes could even melt the white ice.

“If you want Nelina...then you can have her. From the hair on her head...to the inside of her stomach. You can have it all.”

Her voice entered my body. Sweet and passionate as always.

“That’s why...give yourself to Nelina. She wants your music...No, your soul.”

Right now, she is within my grasp. It’s so easy to make her mine. I just have to nod. But...even so.

“Yoshi, you can do it.”

Despite that...**I’m still possessed by the Ghost.**

*

The announcement came for the skating rink to close shop, right after that conversion. Nelina just silently pulled my head toward the tent with the reception. We took off our shoes and stood in the center of Millenium Square again. I looked up at the silver globe that stood tall there. They had set up a planetarium inside, I’ve heard. And the surface of it was so clean, it turned into a mirror that reflected Nelina and me. I could feel the will burning in my head slowly cooling down. And at the same time, a certain thought passed through my brain. Nelina’s feelings definitely reached me. But...I took her hand.

“Huh? Yoshi?”

I pulled her along as I started walking. We made it past the science museum, crossing Anchor Road. There was something that I needed to show her. I walked through the brick way and then stood in the back of Lower Ram Street. In front of us was graffiti that was pierced and shredded by lightning.

“There’s one thing I’d like to ask you.”

“What is it? If it’s about Nelina’s plans after this, she’s got time until tomorrow noon.”

“This [Z] here...It was you who did it, right?”

For the first time since coming to Bristol, Nelina had a surprised expression on her face.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb. You ripped Boo-san’s graffiti apart with a high-pressure washer and created this [Z] shape, didn’t you?”

“Come again? What’s the doodle stray cat got to do with this?”

“It’s not just that.”

I swear...Why did it take me so long to realize?

“*You can speak English, right?*”

Hearing me speak, her eyes opened wide and she smiled. Her body bent as she laughed so loud, her voice sounded like it would break. Finally, she wiped her tears away with her index finger. And then, she spoke up with a pronunciation that sounded close to a native speaker’s.

“...*How did you know?*”

Her dampened eyes from before had vanished. She now glared at me with the sharp gaze of a cautious fox.

“Awww, man. *I thought it was perfect.*” She continued by speaking English, and I responded in fashion.

“The work of [Z] in the Bearpit was done by JF-san. However, he only injured the graffiti by the people from **Queen Bear’s Revenge**. And he must know that this graffiti here belongs to Boo-san. There’s no way he wouldn’t know.”

What first caught my attention was JF’s statement: He **pretended** to be [Z]. I didn’t give it much thought at the time, but the way he phrased that made it clear that [Z] existed before he started his own work. And with only one other graffiti having suffered from [Z], it was clear that something didn’t sit right.

“Sure, it could have been someone completely unrelated who just did it on a whim. However, it’s not written in a palace that stands out too much. And unlike the regular spray, a high-pressure washer isn’t something you can just carry around all day. That’s why it’s valid to assume someone targeted this especially.”

“Oh, geez. There’s no way Nelina would know about some graffiti.”

“Not quite. Aeon-san is the one who showed you around, and he said he showed you the Ghost’s graffiti. And then, it’s more than plausible that he told you about the Ghost’s true identity.”

“Even if that may be true, there’s no way Nelina would have such a thing on her. She’s traveling, remember?”

“I think it’s the opposite.”

“That makes no sense.”

“You didn’t bring a pressure washer to write the [Z]. Instead, there just happened to be a pressure washer in the near vicinity, which is why it ended up like this. You stayed at a private residence, right? Then it wouldn’t be weird for them to have a pressure washer lying around. You saw that and remembered Boo-san’s graffiti. You wanted to hurt her. Isn’t that right?”

Nelina grinned, which acted as a silent affirmation.

“Were you always this smart?”

“I went through a lot.”

The *Graffiti Detective*—It’s not a name I deserve. But as the assistant of such, I have seen many things with Boudicia by my side. That’s why I could arrive at this conclusion.

“But how did you figure out that Nelina could speak English?”

“The small things stood out to me. When we were talking to Gabriel for the first time, the color of your expression changed before I could even translate anything. That was one thing that made me dubious.”

“Nelina thought that you’d look after her more if she *pretended* to be clueless. Did that work?”

“...I’m embarrassed that I fell for that.”

“Also, Nelina’s getting close to actually selling her own music, so there’s no way she wouldn’t be able to speak English, you know?”

“All the songs we played so far have been Japanese, that’s why...No, that doesn’t matter anyway.”

There’s only one reason why I would drag Nelina all the way here.

“*Apologize.*”

“Huuuuuuuh?”

Her groan made it clear she didn’t understand what I just said. On our way here, I actually contacted Boudicia with my phone.

“Boo-san will come here soon. Let’s apologize together, okay?”

“That makes no sense. Why would Nelina have to apologize to that *poor kitty*?” Nelina’s expression grew twisted.

It felt like I could see her true face beneath all the facades.

“Because you destroyed her hard work.”

“Just overwrite it, then. Nelina knows how that works with graffiti.”

“When overwriting something, it has to be much more complicated than the previous work, or it has to look even better. That’s the unwritten rule of graffiti.”

“The hell? Nelina isn’t a graffiti writer, though. Why would she have to abide by some weird rules that don’t concern her?”

“That’s...”

“Also, why are you this angry, anyway? To you, this *does not matter*, right?”

Those words stabbed me deep inside my chest. This definitely is Boudicia's problem. Why am I so desperately trying to unveil the identity of [Z] anyway? It doesn't have anything to do with me. I'm not a citizen here in Bristol. I'm not a graffiti writer. And...Boudicia and I aren't...

"Yes, it does."

But then...I heard the roar of the lion.

"...!"

Seeing her arrival, Nelina let out a faint groan.

"I said it does matter, fox. But to think you turned out to be [Z], eh?" Boudicia stepped between me and Nelina. "And you can even speak English? Good, good, that means all the insults I threw at you so far definitely reached you!"

"Annoying...Annoying, annoying, annoying! Nelina absolutely despises you! Unforgivable! Why do you keep getting in Nelina's way? I was *this close!*"

"Hah, you sound like a *villain!*"

"You're the true *villain*. Because Yoshi's *princess*...No, Nelina is the *prince* who saved Yoshi!"

I didn't even have any time to get between them, as Nelina tried to grab Boudicia's collar, but she evaded that and brushed the approaching hand away.

"You've been pissing me off this entire time. And if you're gonna be like this...then I have no more reason to hold back." Boudicia snorted. "I told you, right? That I'd be bringing the *shotgun* next time."

And then, Boudicia readied her fists. She had her right hand near her jaw and her left hand straight ahead. She jumped up lightly several times, gently stopping the impact with her knees. And from beneath her cap, she glared at her opponent. It was a perfect boxer's stature.

“Seems like you won’t get it if Nelina doesn’t give you a beating.”
Nelina sighed and then lowered her hip.

She opened her left hand, placing her right hand below her chest.

“Heh, haven’t done this in a while since I started graffiti. My blood is boiling.”

“You shouldn’t underestimate the self-defense anti-sexual harassment *karate* that Nelina learned.”

One touch and everything would explode.

“That’s clearly not something you should be using for a street fight like this, Nelina-san!”

“This isn’t a *fight*. It’s a duel between Nelina and that woman. Isn’t that right, kitty?”

“See. You really get it, *bloody fox*.”

The moment I called Boudicia over, I had a feeling that things wouldn’t end peacefully. I had prepared myself for a harsh argument, but throwing fists like this was outside my range of expectations. This...what is this? It’s a fistfight.

“Please calm down, you two. I didn’t get you two to meet for this...”

“You step back!”

“You be quiet, Yoshi!”

Their voices overlapped. Why do they have to be in sync during the worst times? And then, the place was wrapped in silence. The two beasts were glaring at each other. Space, time, and the air stretched out endlessly. Then the thread ripped, and the limit arrived. Like vibrations stretching through space, the two closed in on each other. The first one to attack was Boudicia. She stepped into Nelina’s range with a sharp jab, but Nelina dodged that with a step to the side, taking her distance.

“Why are you even writing on a wall, anyway?”

Now, it was Nelina's turn. She pretended to go in for Boudicia's face, only to sweep in deeper and push her fist toward Boudicia's stomach.

"To win, of course!"

Boudicia lowered her right arm to stop this attack as she answered. She tried to swing her other arm at Nelina's open face, but a twist of the neck made his attack meet empty air.

"You won't get anything from that!"

"So what's the big deal if I have nothing to gain from that?!"

"Because it's bad! Why...How can you be so free?"

"Free? Me?"

"How much work do you think Nelina has put in to blow up as an artist?! How much she sacrificed! How much of her soul she gave away?!" Nelina stepped in closer, as she threw several jabs at Boudicia, who blocked this with her guard.

And as if she had been waiting for that, she rammed one attack right into Boudicia's solar plexus.

"Ugh..." Boudicia groaned as the air left her lungs.

However, her eyes were still burning.

"...You make it sound like you're the only one who's suffering...And I hate people like you the most!"

Boudicia created a faint with her right shoulder, which was read by Nelina. A left straight attack followed.

"You must have it nice. Writing on walls as you please, calling yourself an artist. You get no complaints from your producer, not having to worry if you don't sell an album!"

Receiving another counter, Boudicia's body shook. And Nelina didn't miss out on that.

“Achievements, popularity...you don’t need a damn thing! And yet, everyone in Bristol knows you! They respect you! That pisses Nelina off the most!”

“If you’re so jealous about it, then go write some graffiti yourself!”

Met with a storm of attacks, Boudicia was busy just trying to evade and block.

“Don’t make fun of Nelina! She understands that all too well! She’s forced to flirt with men and women, even older farts, all so that she can make music that will sell!”

“You...”

More jabs followed by Nelina. Boudicia narrowed her body to put up her guard, but Nelina didn’t show any opening.

“You have everything! Yet, you don’t have to become anything. How...How can you even say that while having everything you need?!”

However, these attacks couldn’t continue forever. When Nelina had run out of stamina, Boudicia’s eyes lit up. She quickly lowered her upper body and stepped into Nelina’s range, going for Nelina’s jaw.



“Nelina wants everything...but she can’t have a damn thing...”

Or so it should have been, but Boudicia didn’t realize that Nelina had pulled her right leg back.

“...So give Yoshi back!”

As a result, Nelina’s knee stabbed right into Boudicia’s stomach. It

was a strike with all her might. Speed and power turned into energy that was fired back at Boudicia. However, even that attack didn't phase her. Her face twisted in pain, but she held onto Nelina's leg, not letting go.

"Wha..."

Losing her balance, Nelina fell backward, and so did Boudicia. Nelina's hair spread on the ground like a spider net, as Boudicia's cap fell off her head. But thanks to this, she sat on top of Nelina. And then, the two glared at each other.

"...I'm actually right-handed."

While standing up, Boudicia grabbed her right wrist.

"Nelina knew that. Your movement tells me enough. What about it?" Nelina put her hands on the ground, pushing up her upper body.

Instead of answering, Boudicia pushed up the sleeve of her hoodie.

"That's...!"

This, in return, revealed the scar on her arm. It's the same painful-looking scar I've seen a few times so far. The remains of the blade that stole her right arm from her.

"Look. I can't use this one anymore."

"Nelina felt that your movement was odd...But because of this...! Yet, you're writing graffiti, right...?"

Nelina put her hand on her own throat. She probably imagined what would happen if her throat became unusable. She's a musician. She's using her own body to express herself, so in that way, she wasn't much different from a graffiti writer. So, Nelina should understand the pain Boudicia must feel at losing her one way to express herself.

"Yeah. That's why I thought of quitting graffiti altogether."

While she said so, Boudicia approached me, placed her hand on my shoulder, and pulled me closer.

“But...Thanks to this guy, I decided to try.”

“Boo-san...”

“So, let me ask you. Do you know why Yoshi couldn’t play the guitar anymore?”

“Huh...?”

“Because of what you said. You created a scar deep within Yoshi, just like I have on my arm. Right in his *heart*...No, his *soul*.”

Nelina sat on the floor, looking at me and then back at Boudicia.

“Even so, he played for my sake. And...well, a lot happened, and he even got stabbed with a knife at some point. One wrong step and he could’ve lost his ability to play the guitar. Still, he did it to protect me.”

“Yoshi...is that true?”

I silently nodded.

“That’s why I decided to write again. Because I couldn’t lose against him. And what came from all that...was this graffiti. The one you erased, that is.”

The more Nelina listened, the redder her face became. Of course, it’s not her fault that she didn’t know. The fault lies with me because I didn’t tell her. Because she’d give me an earful? No, even simpler than that...It’s because I didn’t want her to worry. I wanted her to think I was doing okay, even after I ran away.

“...But, I didn’t know that you were hurting, too. You were fighting, huh? Even...by sacrificing your own soul.” Boudicia approached Nelina, offering her left hand. “Sorry about that.”

Nelina blinked in confusion. And after looking at Boudicia’s face, she took that hand and stood up.

“I thought I didn’t need a thing. Popularity, fame, money...I never thought about that. But, I found something I didn’t want to lose.

Something I wanted for myself. And talking to you, *fox*, I realized that.”

Boudicia’s voice was the exact opposite of before. Calm, yet comforting.

“What about you? If you really get everything you want. What’s on your list next, then?”

“I...”

Nelina lowered her face, like a child who was trying to solve a difficult question in school. And I realized that this was the first time she actually spoke of herself in the first person. I’ve always heard rumors about her. Nelina is a genius. Nelina is arrogant. Nelina is... Nelina is...Nelina is...Maybe these rumors led to her watching herself from an outsider’s perspective. If so, then maybe this was the first time she actually spoke of herself as a single artist. Ready to treat herself like an artist.

“...I want things to go my way. I want to make music that I can be proud of and believe in. I want the whole world to listen to it. And for that...for that, I will...”

“Then we’re the same. You and I.”

Nelina’s face shot up, as Boudicia smiled. Their souls were speaking directly with each other.

“Nelina-san, I’m sorry.” I lowered my head to her. “I only thought of myself. Thank you for coming to Bristol to look for me.”

Nelina stood up and crossed her arms, looking away with a grumpy face. But I knew that she wasn’t actually as annoyed as she made it out to be. But I let her be for a moment and turned towards Boudicia next.

“And Boo-san, I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“This whole fight happened because I called you here...No, if I hadn’t

come to Bristol, everything would have been fine.”

“The hell are you on about? If you hadn’t come to Bristol...I sure as heck wouldn’t even be here anymore.”

That’s right. This is the place we first met...without even knowing at first. She wanted to erase her own graffiti and then leave Bristol behind. Fate and destiny always go hand-in-hand, unable to be undone.

“...I won’t apologize!” Nelina said as she pouted. “Yoshi stopped playing because of Nelina...and he could play again thanks to you? Nelina won’t accept that. On Christmas day, Nelina will win and take back Yoshi!”

I couldn’t help but smirk. My own opinion was once again disregarded as always. Meanwhile, Boudicia looked up at her own graffiti, and the letter engraved into it thanks to Nelina’s actions. The method to overwrite this piece...shone brightly in her eyes.

“I’ve decided. I’ll get on Lara’s boat and write. I’m not letting you do as you please any longer than this!” Boudicia declared as she pointed at Nelina like she was about to declare war.

Her smile reminded me of a clear winter sky. And of course, I knew what she would be saying next.

“Yoshi, what are you gonna do?” She asked with a serious voice.

Now it was my turn to decide.

“On Christmas day, you gotta hop on one boat, right?”

“I...”

Boudicia and Nelina—A lion and fox—Ghost and Fairy—Their two souls went on different paths. And I...

“I don’t know which is right or wrong.”

Granted, graffiti could cause harm and damage. But that doesn’t mean I think graffiti as a whole should disappear.

“Wanting to do something...having music I want to create...I don’t really have any goals like this.”

Nelina said I have no soul. Gabriel said I’m empty. Right now, I can accept what they said. They’re both right. If I play with Nelina, it turns into her music. If I play with Gabriel, it turns into his music. But even so...

“I’m a guitarist.”

I am an *instrument*.

“If Boo-san is going to *write*, then I will *play*. If not, I won’t be able to face you with my head held high.”

Because... instruments have something only instruments can do.

“But you know what’s coming, right? If you lose, you gotta scramble. And then...you’ll go back to Japan, right?”

“Yes, I’m prepared for that.”

“I see...If you’ve decided on that, then I got nothing else to say.”

Boudicia was probably all alone. But, that wasn’t all bad, still. Because she knew that people had to abide by their souls, even if it meant being all by themselves. I bent down to grab the cap that had flown off her head before and handed it to her.

“Boo-san, *see you later*.”

“Yeah. Let’s meet again *after a while*.” She put on the cap and walked away.

After I saw her off, Nelina quietly called my name.

“Hey, Yoshi.”

“Yes?”

“I want to win.”

Even after Boudicia had disappeared, Nelina continued to stare at the

place she just stood.

“And if I need to, I won’t hesitate to hurt you. If I think you have no soul, then I’ll say that.”

I see. I always thought that, deep down, she was just anxious and worried. But even beyond that facade...she was a wild beast with a fire burning in her eyes. In that way, the two really resemble each other. I closed my eyes and smiled.

“I think...I really changed.”

“What do you mean?”

“Right now, I realize that there are things more important than not getting hurt or protecting myself. And it was Boo-san who taught me that.”

Before coming to Bristol...before learning about graffiti...and before I met Boudicia...I was different from now.

“I won’t run away. No matter what.”

Nelina heard my words and snorted arrogantly.

“Then let’s show that *poor kitty* what happens if you look down on us!”

*

I am an instrument. And instruments have things only they can do. What is it that, at this moment, I can accomplish? I remembered Aeon’s words. A middle way. An option. Conflict. Maybe Aeon knew that this would happen? Maybe he was aware of the role I had received...Or, the role I had been given. Either way, it doesn’t change a thing. Right now, there were two options in my path that I could choose from.

*

I headed to [The Ark]. My goal was simple. I wanted to meet Gabriel and talk to him. When I stepped onto the boat, Gabriel sat at the

same table as the last time we talked. The only difference is that he was drawing right now. The way he was wearing these glasses now made him almost look defenseless in a way.

“Yoshi, what can I do for you?”

Gabriel saw me, placed his book on the table, and took off his glasses. The title of the book was “Republic,” written by Platon.

“Gabriel-san, I wanted to talk about the live concert on Christmas.”

He audibly sighed, leaned against the sofa, and tapped on the table.

“Personally, I would rather not listen to what you have to say...But you hold the right to do so, so let me hear it.”

To me, it was less than a *right*, and more of a *duty*. I mustered up as much courage as I had and spoke up.

“Can’t we stop this?”

“What do you mean?” Gabriel narrowed his eyes.

But I vowed to not let him threaten me and continued.

“I’m not saying that we should stop the live concert. However, I don’t see any reason for this war. The loser has to leave and never return... can’t we forget about that?”

Gabriel grabbed the book and stared at the cover, mumbling to himself.

“This question brings another with it. Or rather, this might just be the true question that’s on your mind.”

Ask one thing and he’ll figure out ten things. That’s how Gabriel operated. And since I stayed silent, this acted as affirmation.

“You want me to accept the value of graffiti?”

“No, not at all.”

“Then what is it?”

"I talked to Nelina-san. You were right. Even though we played together this whole time, I didn't understand a thing about her."

"...She is *hungry*, yes. However, she is not *stubborn*. At first, I thought of her as *selfish*. But this *pride* of hers acted simply as *self-affirmation*. That's why she has no *hesitation* to change herself."

"I agree."

What I realized after spending so much time with her, Gabriel had already seen a way ahead of me. And his next words truly surprised me.

"She came to talk to me. She said that she needs you and that she wants to get you back. That's why she wants to perform with you, and she will do whatever it takes." Gabriel laughed at his own words.

"Whatever it takes, right? I've never seen a *musician* with such a fierce gaze." He quietly placed the book down on the table again. "And I told her the same thing as I said to you. To become an instrument. I didn't expect much, but she greatly surpassed my expectations." He looked up at the ceiling. "Two whole weeks, you know. She would come first thing in the morning, sing her heart out, listen to all my advice, and sing again. The day went by like this, and she came again early in the morning. For almost 168 hours, she would sing. When I was busy eating or making songs, she worked on her own homework and continued to sing. Any normal person would have had their throat ruined by this. It's her *physical strength* and *determination* that brought her through this."

"I had no idea..."

I was thinking that something was off about Nelina and her voice. But to think this was because of excessive practice...

"Because of this effort, her singing reached the *direction* and *level* I sought. That's all there is to it."

Gabriel doesn't work based on emotions. This became clear through this conversation. He lives as he speaks. Maybe he just cut himself free from these emotions. But then what even is important to him?

"Nelina-san said she made music to obtain what she wanted...But, Gabriel-san, why do you make music?"

His eyes opened faintly.

"...A good question, indeed. I'm almost a bit *surprised*."

He leaned forward, approaching my face.

"I love beautiful music. True music, which isn't stored on *vinyl* or as digital data. Something that is carved into the soul. Something you can remember at any given moment. Something that turns into the hope to live on. I want the citizens here to experience this kind of hope...this kind of music. Does that answer your question, Yoshi?"

Deep within his eyes, I failed yet again to read any emotion. But, there was something burning strong—An *ideal*. And for a tiny bit, it felt like I could understand who he was as a person.

"I'm glad I asked. So, Gabriel-san, let me proceed once more...Can't we stop fighting?"

"No can do. Graffiti is *wrong*. That is the truth."

"But they'll write on an abandoned boat. And they have permission from the owner..."

"The target and surface do not matter. Permission or not won't change my opinion. As long as this culture exists, any graffiti is vandalism. The *destruction* of the town does not stop. Isn't that right?"

Once again, he is right. Granted, this was legally acceptable and nobody was getting hurt...But it was an isolated example. The counterargument that beautiful graffiti can be considered art is already out of the question. Because through the passage of time and corrosion, graffiti can never withstand the ages. As long as graffiti is considered the culture of the street, it's impossible to differentiate between "good" and "bad" graffiti. And Gabriel knew that. But even so, there was something I had to tell him.

"I won't participate in your music to erase graffiti. And I won't do it for my friends. I don't want to play music in order to deny

something. Is that okay with you?”

Gabriel’s eyes opened wide, as he smiled with a somewhat exhausted expression.

“You really are *serious*. You already know the answer to that, don’t you?”

“Thank you very much.”

In the end, it still didn’t go as I wished it to. But, I had expected this result. I told myself that this was the best possible end and stood up.

“Yoshi.”

“Yes?”

Gabriel stopped me once, and I turned around.

“...I’m looking forward to Christmas.”

Usually, his voice was devoid of emotion. However, I could pick up a faint amount of excitement, sweet like chocolate. The first point on my agenda may have ended in failure, but there was something else I had to do. Or rather, someone I had to meet. I stood in front of the hospital room, slowly opening the door. Familiar and long bluish-green hair filled the bed.

“...*Oh dear. What a surprise,*” she said and formed a smile with her pale lips.

Advertisement

Chapter 6: “Heat Miser”

And then, Christmas arrived. How many years has it been since I was this anxious about Christmas? Pretty sure it's been at least since my early childhood. Ever since the presents on my pillow started to disappear, I didn't consider it an event that had anything to do with me. It was just a day that other people spent together. However, today was different. I stood in the center of the *war* that would happen today. I was feeling excited about what would happen, but rather than joy, it was the necessary energy I needed to keep my head in check and not forget what was on the line. I was actually thinking of playing the guitar a bit to calm myself down, but I knew that whatever I could do, it was already too late.

I gave up and opted to take a walk, leaving Manor Hall after me. I figured the city would be on edge, but it was eerily calm. It was comparable to Japan's New Year's. Most shops had closed, so the majority of people surely will spend the rest of the day at home. And today, it was relatively cold compared to the other days. The cold wind from the harborside pierced me and sent a shiver down my spine. It must be the calm before the storm.

Since I had made up my mind and found my own solution, I practiced a lot in hindsight of the Christmas War. And since I was already on semester break from university, I got up early, went to [The Ark], met up with Nelina, Gabriel, and JF, and then practiced until late at night. Most of it was strictly done through Gabriel's instructions. At first, all I could do was follow his orders and ensure I played what he expected me to. Just like an instrument, truly. But that was just the starting point. Finally, we reached an endless repeat of *give me a question*. Think. Surprise him. Give him a never-seen experience.

During the practice, I understood quickly that JF simply wanted a supporting role, too. If I did something crazy on stage, it would mess

up his equipment. And he was the stone standing tall. Nelina also responded to all of Gabriel's requests, too. She constantly changed her way of singing, too. And each time our practice was over, she went to drink a beer and let out her stress by complaining to me. But I knew...that this was her way of showing her trust.

That's why I didn't mind looking after her. The problem was my own music, actually. I was simply desperate to keep up. I'm never good at coming up with something new. On the same scale, doing the same playstyle, Gabriel reminded me over and over. And that hasn't changed now. I made up my mind to play the guitar. However, I failed to reach the conclusion of what music I should play, and for what reason. Meanwhile, Nelina showed her unlimited talent and responded to all that Gabriel requested.

However, even as the day approached, I was unsure. The music itself I had nailed. I repeated it over and over and pulled it off just fine. However...is this really good enough? I realized that I had walked quite a long time, and my body had cooled down aggressively. I thought of getting some warm coffee, only to see no cafe around me. It's because I'd usually have my coffee at the Bearpit. But ever since I made up my mind to participate in the concert, I haven't set foot in there. I haven't met Lara or Peni. Not even Boudicia, for that matter.

Oddly enough, I wasn't longing to meet her, either. Even the times we were apart were enjoyable to me. I wondered just what this feeling was and then realized it. We arranged to meet up beforehand. Tomorrow, Boudicia will come. That ship stopped near the river. We may come from different places, walking our separate paths, but we head to the same place. To fight? No, that's not quite it. I worked hard so that it wouldn't come that far. Granted, I don't know if it will work out, but at the very least, I won't be a bystander any longer. All I can do is have faith in what I have to do and give it all I got. No matter what result this may bring.

Bristol was covered by thick clouds, making me think that maybe it'll run tomorrow.

*

"Nice to meet you. You must be Gabriel."

“And you are Captain Lara. Though, after everything I know about you, this really does not feel like our first meeting. And I know plenty of your *stubbornness*.”

“The feeling is mutual. I’m here to *crush* that *prejudice* of yours.”

“Crush? Really, you’re all *savages*.”

“*Why, thank you. We are pirates, after all. That is a compliment for us.*”

It was Christmas Day, and two ships had stopped adjacent to the river. Next to [The Ark] stood another that was close enough to crash into it. It was an old boat made of mostly wood. It was a good bit smaller than [The Ark], but together with its three masts, the sheer size towered even over ours. Now, Lara and Gabriel stood in front of those two ships, looking at each other. Or rather, Lara had to look up at him, which felt like I was gazing at the two ships in general.

It’s like all the water had evaporated from the air. We were right next to the river, and yet my throat felt parched like everything would burn up in flames because of the smallest spark. And it wasn’t any imagination, I just felt that nervous.

“The winner will remain in Bristol. The loser will have to leave. Sounds good, right?”

“Yeah. And the ones who will decide that are the citizens. Once Christmas is over, one of us will be gone. Their voices will tell.”

“Playing *fair*, yeah?”

“I always play *fair*. Because I am *right*.”

“Those who call themselves *right* rarely are, you know?”

“That is not something for you to decide, Captain. The citizens...No, history will decide that.”

Soon enough, we were surrounded by citizens. Using social media and personal blogs, they gathered people here who will decide if graffiti or music will stay in Bristol. Right now, it was Gabriel, Nelina, JF, and me standing on our side. Facing us were Lara, Peni,

and the writers of **Queen Bear's Revenge**. Their ages varied greatly, too. I realized once again that this was a *war*.

"That's right. I...No, we will win."

I heard a familiar voice. The lion's sharp gaze lit up in the night, as she revealed herself.

"Boo! So you came! But, why..."

"Thank that *fox* over there. She pissed me off."

"Huh? What do you..."

Lara was bewildered, but Nelina crossed her arms and looked away. On the surface, she seemed annoyed.

"Lara, let me be straight with you. This isn't for your sake, nor is it for Bristol. I'm here...to get what I want for myself."

"...Thank you, Boo."

Normally, Lara would immediately leap at Boudicia. However, she composed herself. Instead, Nelina took a step forward.

"This time, I will *beat you up*. With my music, of course."

"Fight's on. *I will hunt you down, fox.*"

Their eyes, their gazes—their souls clashed.

"JF. Don't hold back, got it?"

"I'll write, too. I can't be sitting on the sidelines forever."

"Yeah. I'm done acting half-baked."

Lara, Peni, and JF all confirmed their feelings. It still felt unreal. There was an invisible line between the two ships, signaling the limit for each faction. I stood on one side, staring at Boudicia across from me. She looked at me, too. I glanced at the line below us, and then—stepped over that line with one step.

“Boo-san.” She didn’t respond, so I continued. “Back then, we fought together...But I had never known things would develop like this...”

“Once I’ve decided to fight, I’ll go out with everything I have. That’s all there is. Aren’t you the same?” Boudicia looked at me.

That’s right. I’ll fight with all I have. It’s the same for me.

“Yes...And I’ve got my own methods,” I said and turned around.

During that time, my eyes met with Lala’s. She faintly nodded, in a way that only I could realize.

“Then let us begin...*Merry Christmas.*”

And like this, our very special Christmas began.

*

[The Ark] was filled with people. Of course, I didn’t know what they felt, what they thought, and what they expected when they came here. They might be Gabriel’s fans. Maybe they’re interested in [New Announcement]. Maybe they just came here to check what all the fuss was about. Maybe they’re aggressively against graffiti and came here to show their opinion. But either way, they chose to use their once-a-year Christmas evening to come here. There’s no mistaking that. And as I stood on the side of the sage, I listened to the audience. I could hear faint voices, slowly turning into a wave that completely filled the hall.

Today, only [New Announcement] will be playing. That’s why we had already finished setting up the sage, and I had my guitar on me. I looked behind me, seeing JF rubbing his hands together. Nelina was jumping on the spot like a rabbit. It’s something like her routine whenever she would step on stage. She said that during her first performance, she was so stiff that she couldn’t even sing, and I remember how embarrassed she looked when she said that. Only Gabriel was the same as always. It seems like the concept of tension didn’t exist in his vocabulary.

He looked at the clock, checked our faces, and then walked toward the stage. It’s time, it seems. I watched him, JF, and Nelina walk onto

the stage. I could see my hand was faintly shaking. To stop myself, I tightly formed a fist and stepped on the stage. Normally, this is where the cheers would come in. But, it was eerily calm right now. Everyone was waiting. Everyone knew that today's stage was different. I raised my guitar, putting it on my shoulder. It felt heavier than usual. I had the pic in my right hand, checking the sensation of the strings in my left hand.

Everyone took their positions, waiting for me to play. The first song of our concert had its first start with the guitar. It's relatively rare to have a song begin with the guitar as the rest joined in. And the rest, who had its tempo determined, won't be able to adjust once it's off-rhythm. In practice, I pulled it off. I managed to perfectly be on time since Gabriel was very strict with that. But now, I didn't know what the right tempo would be. My racing heart was beating too fast. The spotlights gathered on me, turning the audience pitch black. It felt like I carried my guitar all by myself in this dark world. And then, this darkness asked me:

Did I change? Just like when I couldn't play at all, my hand was shaking right now. Having come all this way...did I not change at all? Without even being aware of it, I relied on Nelina to show me the way. When we were in Japan, it was simply because she is a genius, and I'm not. That's why I thought I just had to do as she told me. That I simply had to match her momentum and let myself get pulled along. She realized this and told me. Gabriel said I have a question to ask myself. And...he's right. The question of "Have I changed?" is fundamentally wrong. I will change...over and over. My environment changes, my relationships progress or regress, and I will have to answer a new question. Nobody goes through the same thing again.

I closed my eyes. What appeared in my mind was always the same—Boudicia's profile. And that day when she wrote. Even after losing her right hand, her left inherited it all. Even if I'm not perfect...even if I don't always have the right answer...We will always continue to change.

As the audience looked black like the sea at night, I once again focused on my ears. This space...is brimming with anticipation. Time...is waiting for something to happen. Then, I'll just play as the

world expects me to. I slammed my pick down the chords. The signal went from my guitar to the speaker, made it vibrate, and filled the air. Immediately after, the people in the audience gasped. I could hear their confusion, but I continued to play.

I ignored the tempo we practiced. The lines we decided on. Everything. I just matched my music with the always-accelerating beating of my heart. Right now, the music that was born inside my body, I let my emotions clash with my music. Burning up everything that was inside of me, I was thrown into emptiness. The sound from my guitar continued to vibrate a bit longer, changing into a louder feedback noise. What a selfish performance, I thought to myself. I ruined it all. What's gonna happen now?

While feeling like this wasn't even my problem, I looked around the stage. JF gave me a thumbs-up. Nelina winked at me with a smile. And Gabriel—seemed satisfied. I see, so this was good enough. Everything is changing...and our changed music will restart right here, right now. We all breathed in at once. JF, Nelina, Gabriel, and I—all prepared ourselves. And then, I jumped high into the air. When I landed, the music started, swallowing up everything like a tidal wave.

*

Even after the performance ended, the heat and excitement didn't vanish from [The Ark]. I stepped down to the side of the stage, immediately calling out to Gabriel and Nelina.

“Gabriel-san! Nelina-san!”

“Yoshi, that performance just now...”

“That can wait! Come with me.”

“What?”

“You too, Nelina-san!”

“H-Hey!”

I grabbed both of their hands and headed for the exit. When we

showed up in the bar, people cheered in excitement. And although I wanted to be happy about that, there was something more important that would overwrite that soon enough.

“Everyone!” I screamed in a loud voice so that everyone could hear me. *“Take a look outside! Something is happening!”*

The people were confused but still stepped off the ship. Gabriel and Nelina also gave me dubious looks.

“Just come with me, you two.”

“Yoshi, what is going on?”

“You two? But where is JF...”

“That doesn’t matter right now!”

I dragged them with me to the crowd outside the ship. Floating in the water there was a Ghost Ship. Amidst the navy-blue night we were in, it glowed in a strong orange color. It was a hallucination scene incomparable to before. After seeing our arrival, the pirates clapped. This began to spread as the air around us sounded like it was roaring.

“What is this...?”

Even the calm Gabriel couldn’t help but look around in confusion. And then Nelina raised her voice like she realized something.

“Wait...Yoshi, did you...!”

“Haha! I love to see a plan working out!”

The one to arrive and bring energy to the darkness was none other than JF.

“JF? What are you...”

“Yoshi asked me to help out, y’know. We connected the speakers so that everybody could hear our performance...Even outside, that is!”

“They heard our music.”

Aeon told me that, if I can't choose one option, then I'm caught in the conflict. So what's important is to move away from the conflict. That's why I followed his advice, except in my own way.

"So, this is your answer? Are you admitting defeat just like this?"

"Hell no."

"You are..."

We looked toward the source of that voice when silhouettes appeared from the ghost ship. One wore a red cap, and the other had green hair.

"We'll write from now on."

"What did you say?" Gabriel returned a question.

Normally, he always asked the correct questions, and yet he was dumbfounded for once.

"Really, I never would have expected Yoshi to be this *clever*."

"Yoshi, you...!"

Hearing Lara's words, Gabriel's face shot toward me.

"That's right. Yoshi told us to delay our start. To listen to your performance. And...to ensure that you could watch our graffiti being born."

That day—There were two things on my list. First, I wanted to convince Gabriel to stop this war, and find a way for graffiti and music to co-exist. But, this ended in failure. So, I went with my alternative *plan*. First, I wanted all graffiti writers to listen to our music. And then, I wanted all the people who love music to observe the graffiti being written. But, just listening to it alone wasn't enough. It had to be *live*. It had to be portrayed in front of the people. I didn't know how things would play out for a moment...but hearing that applause, it didn't seem too bad.

"Well, just waiting would have been boring, so we decorated the

place a bit. What do you think? Feels Christmas-y, right”

“I swear, Lara gave me such a fight. You even kept it a secret from me,” Boudicia said as she pouted.

Seeing that defenseless smile, I burst out laughing.

“I’m sorry. But...I didn’t want to ruin your determination, Boo-san.”

“That’s part of why I’m so pissed!”

Lara smiled as she listened to our exchange, grabbed her megaphone, and stood at the helm of the ship.

“Merry Christmas, everyone.”

The crowd stopped moving. The people who just stepped out of [The Ark], the graffiti writers on the ship, even all the citizens...they just listened in silence.

“Now of all days, this ship here is our **Queen Bear’s Revenge**. Let us show our respect to these musicians and grant them the honor of joining us. Burn this sight into your eyes...Because this is how we do things.”

This voice reached the ears—and ultimately the hearts of everyone. Their emotions grew and resonated with each other. This time was filled with compassion. And then, Lara declared.

“Now, weigh the anchor! Ready and aim! Soon, everyone will know! We are...”

Lara glanced at Gabriel, and she knew. The “we” involved all of “us.” Not leaving a single person behind.

“We are Bristol! Yohoho!”

Yohohoho! All the writers chimed in and began writing. The outside of the ship, the interior, and all places were filled with spray paint. Red, blue, green, purple, yellow, pink, orange, mustard, tangerine orange, argo blue, vivid red, Canarias yellow, metropolis gray, and then beryl green...They turned into trails of spray, filling the wall

slowly but steadily. The world was filled with colors. Then, it slowly turned into shape. The magic sealed away inside the spray cans was set free, as I took Gabriel and Nelina with me onto the ship. From the deck, the people who listened to our music had glasses from [The Ark] in their hands as they watched the ship be covered with art and letters.

Seeing all of this peaceful, pleasant, and warming spectacle unfold while it was illuminated by the lights, I was reminded of the festivals home in Japan. Of course, they don't have yukata or fireworks here... But they have graffiti.

In all the chaos, I spotted Boudicia. She looked up at me and smiled without uttering a word. I smiled back because we didn't need any more words. She wrote her graffiti right behind the steering wheel, at the center of the ship. Her golden hair shook at every move, like a wave that moved down her back, shoulders, arms, and up to her fingertips, as it created an image on the wall.

"Gabriel-san, Nelina-san...This is your first time watching graffiti being written, right?"

Gabriel and Nelina just stared at Boudicia in a daze.

"I see...This is how they draw it...How they draw graffiti," Gabriel muttered as he watched Boudicia write her graffiti with all her might. "I've always loved beautiful music. I thought it was breathtaking to see people become instruments themselves for that reason...I've seen so many walls that were hurt. But...I guess I never looked at the person writing the graffiti. Maybe I asked the wrong question...this whole time," he said and closed his eyes. "*We are Bristol*, huh..." He repeated Lara's previous words.

The mast right ahead of us was covered in a gentle light.

"Nelina doesn't get it," Nelina muttered as her gaze was glued to Boudicia's back. "Nelina just got here a few days ago. Never tried graffiti. Never cared about this town. Never knew a thing...And that's so frustrating, but..." In her eyes, she still only had Boudicia. "For the first time in my life, I thought that someone is cuter than me," Nelina pouted.

“Nelina-san...”

“Gaaah, no! Not true! She’s still below Nelina, no doubt!”

“Haha, we can leave it at that.”

I know right now that there could be no greater praise from Nelina.

“...Nelina still doesn’t get why you stopped playing the guitar.” She said as she looked at Boudicia, and smiled. “But at the very least... She sorta gets why you started playing again.”

When Boudicia finished writing her graffiti, she turned around and waved at us.

*

The writers filled the ship to the brink with graffiti. I’ve seen walls buried with graffiti countless times so far...But this was something else. It reached from the stem to the stern, left to right without leaving even the smallest gap, as you could see paintings and letters at every corner. The tone of each work was a tiny bit different, making it feel like gaps and borders had been crossed and become hazy. Rather than the ship being full of graffiti, it’s like the whole ship became a single masterpiece, as it was revived from the brink of death to receive new energy.

I don’t know anymore who came to listen to the music, and who came to watch the graffiti. They all had drinks from the bar in [The Ark] in their hands, drawing their own memories of this event. And at the same time, pleasant music played from the speakers. And if I had to guess, it was probably JF’s selection to match this holy Christmas night. While I stood on the deck of the ship, I looked down at all the graffiti. Nobody stood on the boat any longer. It was just me and the various works. Boudicia’s graffiti was written on the back of the ship, next to the steering wheel, and best visible of all. Shown there were a pigeon and a bear.

The pigeon came soaring down from the sky, and the bear stood on the ground with its legs. Placed on a diagonal line, they were in the center of the graffiti, their heads pushed together as if they were

kissing. The lines drawn were simple, comical, and had a pop feel to them. It felt like I was watching a still frame of an animation or a cartoon. Boudicia's previous graffiti was drawn with precision, embodying pressure and vigor, as it felt like I stared a lion in the eyes. With her right hand as it was right now, she probably won't be able to spray as precisely as that ever again.

And even so, this graffiti has begun to move again. The pigeon flew into the sky, and the bear walked on the ground. When the two approach each other, in that split second they converse, you can feel the distant past and the approaching future overlap. And then, there was a line of text written above the two—*This night*.

On this Christmas night, we will change. I was reminded of Banksy's "Mild Mild West" that Lara showed me before. The graffiti of the teddy bear throwing a Molotov cocktail at the police officers. Will this graffiti in front of me be preserved in a similar way? And will it remind people of the past, just like "Mild Mild West" is doing now, twenty years later?

Will someone look at this graffiti and be reminded of today? What will the city be like then? Where will I be? And—Right as my thoughts reached one conclusion, a hand was placed on my shoulder. Turning around, there stood Boudicia.

"Not bad, I gotta say." She grinned at me, leaning against the railing of the deck.

Because it was made of wood, it let out a worryingly aged sound.

"I didn't expect you to go this far, Yoshi."

"Tell me about it. I'm still in shock at my own actions."

"The heck!" She laughed.

"And I could say the same. I never would have imagined that you would write graffiti like this, Boudicia-san."

"Mm...Well, yeah."

"Is it...because your right arm won't move anymore?"

Boudicia didn't answer and instead took out her vape, putting it in her mouth. The blue LED light lit up, with white smoke being dispersed into the darkness. Boudicia then gazed up at the sky as if she tried to follow the smoke.

"...That first guitar part of your concert...It wasn't supposed to be that way, right?"

That's absolutely right. And I was flabbergasted to hear her say that. At the same time, I was embarrassed that she found out. Even so, she continued.

"Hearing that, I was shocked. Considering how wild all of it was." She laughed as more white smoke came out of her mouth. "At first, I thought it wasn't like you at all. But...even graffiti never is the same. And we write on a different wall every time."

The orange light lit up her profile, creating a gentle feeling.

"...No matter how much I practice, I won't be able to draw the same way as before. I can tell as much myself. But, I've accepted that. My style, and what I want to write...I don't mind if that changes. Or rather, it won't be the same forever, anyway." She said and her stern expression slowly crumbled. "Gaaah, why can't I just say what I want to say! Anyway! Listening to you play the guitar like that made me feel this way!" She said and rammed her left hand into my shoulder.

Despite the momentum, it was a gentle push.

"I can't really express it either, but..." So that she wouldn't realize my voice was shaking, I carefully voiced my thoughts. "When I was playing the guitar before, I was thinking of you, Boo-san."

At first, she looked at me in confusion. Only after a brief silence, she began laughing. She sounded delighted from the bottom of her heart, as it reverberated and disappeared into the night.

"So things ended up like that because of how wild I am?! Makes no sense!"

After laughing for a while, she wiped her tears away and stuffed her hands into her pocket. She then looked up at me.

“But...Am I really that wild?”

“Huh?”

“Did you never...y’know, think of me as *cute* before?”

Boudicia’s gaze pierced through my heart. The impact I felt could be compared to getting shot right through the chest, as even my breathing stopped. All the myriad expressions I’ve seen from her so far raced through my mind. Answering that question would be simple. But...if I were to say what I genuinely feel, then something definitive might change within our relationship.

“Hey there, Yoshi.”

Although I didn’t want to admit it, I was a bit thankful when Gabriel’s voice interrupted the awkward silence between us.

“Gabriel-san.”

“Did I possibly interrupt you?”

When Gabriel glanced at Boudicia, he almost seemed like he was pulling a joke.

“N-No way! It’s not like that!”

“So you were Boudicia, right?”

Seeing them face each other, I was beginning to feel anxious.

“I’d like to thank you. You created something wonderful tonight. *Cheers.*” Gabriel looked at the graffiti Boudicia created and tilted his glass.

I saw that and sighed in relief.

“Truly, this graffiti does not hurt anybody. Rather, it brings people together. Yoshi, maybe you were the one who was right the entire time.”

“Gabriel-san, you really stay true to your word. That you don’t lie to

yourself and live a correct life...And that's all I tried with this."

"Mhm...A *good question*. As well as a *good answer*." Gabriel said as she watched the beer inside his glass shake. "You played good music tonight, Yoshi."

"Huh?"

"I didn't think you had something like that in you. I don't think our performance would have ended up in such a way if you played according to our practice."

"Ah, I was just so lost in thought that I..."

Thinking back on it now, I could feel a cold shiver run down my spine. I'm shocked I could even do something like that. It was reckless, to say the least. But even so, Gabriel praised me for it. My decision...No, my music. To me, that was something very meaningful. So much so that my chest started to burn hot.

"But, Yoshi...I don't believe you hold that much talent for music."

He immediately sliced through my joy. And yet, I wasn't as depressed as I thought I'd be.

"Talent is something deeply rooted within your body. Through rigorous training, you can definitely obtain the necessary skill. However, that's just on a technical level. Without the solid ground for it, no flower can bloom...You get what I mean, right?"

I nodded. I knew that better than anybody else. That I'm different from Nelina, or Boudicia.

"But...I believe that you may have a different talent."

A different talent...? What does he...? But before I could ask, he took a sip from his beer and sighed.

"I can tell. That your music has been influenced by graffiti. That is why I have to accept it." And then he sighed, as he just spoke to himself. "...Will *Grandma* be able to accept this?"

Boudicia didn't miss that.

"Grandma?"

"We were pretty close. She passed away last year, right around Christmas."

"Hm, sounds nice."

"Oh, what do you mean?"

"I was always on bad terms with my grandma."

"Really? Well, at least your graffiti can continue."

These words made me feel like something was off. However, Boudicia asked a question before I could dig deeper.

"What was your grandma like?"

Surely, that question must have made countless memories resurface inside Gabriel's head. He gently smiled, as he placed one hand on the railing.

"Both my parents were musicians. She'd let me listen to music, teach me how to play the piano...Very strictly, too." He gently caressed the wooden railing. "That's why I'd often go to my grandma's place to play. She owned a music store over at Park Street. It wasn't a big store, but there were so many instruments, it smelled like wood in there. She was always proud, saying that she was raising the next generation of Bristol's music."

"Sounds like a great grandma, all right." Boudicia laughed. "I would have loved to have a grandma like her."

"Also, she was the exact opposite of my parents, absolutely in love with rock. I was always listening to The Who. And each time, she said that now it was '*your generation*' next."

Boudicia stared at Gabriel like she was thinking about something.

"And because she said so, I genuinely believed in it. In my life, which

was regulated to the smallest step...I really felt like my life was my own for once.”

I’ve walked down Park Street a few times, myself. But, I had no idea there was a music store.

“But...One day, someone had written graffiti on her store.”

Graffiti—The moment that word popped up, I swallowed my breath.

“It was a small thing at first. She let it go, saying that this was normal if you lived in Bristol. But, it continued to escalate. It was like her store turned into a blank canvas. More and more graffiti followed as the old one wasn’t even erased, just overwritten. You couldn’t even see inside the store any longer. Eventually, everybody forgot what that store even sold...until it went out of business.”

The golden liquid inside his glass swayed left and right.

“Shortly after, she got sick and passed away. That happened last Christmas.” Gabriel placed the glass on the railing.

Almost like he was honoring the dead. In this city, graffiti and music go hand in hand as they created this special culture. Yet, Gabriel was so hungry to erase all graffiti that he started a war. Why would he go to such lengths? His conversation just now was plenty of an explanation. He must think that graffiti...killed his grandmother.

“The music store...at Park Street...” Boudicia put her hand to her mouth and started thinking.

At the same time, Gabriel’s movement stopped, as he looked at the graffiti. They raised their voices at the exact same moment.

“Gabriel...I remembered...”

“This sign...It looks familiar...Don’t tell me...”

“I wrote graffiti on your grandma’s store.”

“So you are...”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“You are the Ghost of Bristol?!”

I couldn’t believe it. Or rather, I didn’t want to. The threads of fate have intertwined in such a place, such a location. When met with this revelation, Gabriel began shaking slightly.

“...Gabriel-san, are you okay?”

“Oh, don’t you worry about me. I just wanted to indulge in a toast, nothing more.”

With a quivering hand, he reached inside the pocket of his coat. What appeared from that was a small bottle with liquor inside.

“A toast? Gabriel-san, what are you...”

“Do you smoke, Yoshi?”

“No, I don’t...”

He took out a small rectangular lighter.

“What a coincidence. Neither do I.”

He opened the lid with one hand, turning on the fire as a faint flame appeared. I looked at his hands again. In one hand, he had a lighter. In the other, he held a bottle with transparent liquid inside. The bottle had a bit of fabric hanging out at the bottleneck. Something about this felt familiar. It was like the object in the teddy bear’s hand—A **Molotov cocktail**.

“It’s what you graffiti writers love to use. *An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*. I thought it sounded applicable here.”

“Gabriel-san?! Was this your plan from the very beginning?!”

“Yoshi, I didn’t think I would have to do this because of your efforts. But with the Ghost here, that changes things.”

“But...you said that people could finally connect! And your

grandmother surely wouldn't..."

"I won't forgive them!"

That voice coming from Gabriel was unlike anything I'd ever heard from him.

"It's wrong! And you did it! You...killed *grandma*! I can't accept that as right! That is... is the only *answer*! And that won't ever change! Because it is the truth!" Gabriel muttered as he slowly moved the lighter toward the fabric inside the bottle.

As the flame passed over to the fabric, it lit up brightly, illuminating Gabriel's face.

"...Back then, someone wrote graffiti on that store. I tried to overwrite that when your grandma saw me." Boudicia explained with a quivering voice. "I thought of running away, but then your grandma stopped me. Said 'Don't run. At least finish it to the very end.' And each time someone wrote some lame-ass graffiti on her window, I came to overwrite it. Whenever she saw that, she praised me, saying '*Not bad.*' So far, nobody would ever accept me for who I am or what I do. And yet, she spoke so kindly of it." She lowered her head and gazed at her right hand.

Her right hand, which was now not able to function properly any longer.

"That grandma told me...that she doesn't understand much about graffiti, but she knows that it's part of Bristol's culture. And she said I should look after this palace...Because it's '*your generation*' now."

Gabriel's eyes shot wide open when he heard that.

"It felt like she was my own grandma. But...the store eventually closed, and she disappeared...And I didn't know where she went."

"That's...*Grandma*, she...Didn't say anything...to me..."

"I didn't know a damn thing. Because of me, her store was forced to close. I was the one...who killed her...!" Boudicia couldn't stand anymore as she sank to the ground on one knee.

Meanwhile, the flame of the bottle continued to sway in Gabriel's eyes.

"Please, stop this! If you throw it into the water, then...!"

"...Even so, Grandma won't come back to life. The past can't be changed. All that was hurt...won't come back again. Never...!"

I couldn't hope to understand Gabriel's pain. But surely, Gabriel should know. That you can't get this time back, and that the past can't be changed. Even if you burn everything to the ground.

"Gabriel-san!"

I jumped at him in order to grab the bottle. Meanwhile, Gabriel hesitated, turning around to throw the bottle into the water... However, the burning cloth touched his hand, and my hand slipped past the bottle as it fell out of his hand. The bottle then fell onto the deck, followed by what sounded like a beast's roar. Light flickered up to illuminate the dark knight. My eyes were blinded, as I covered my head in the heat of the moment. My arms felt scorching hot. Looking around, the fires spread as if they tried to swallow the world itself. Even Gabriel's shadow was now shaking behind the fire.

I closed my ears, feeling terror. However, I quickly realized that I was a lot calmer than I expected to be. When I opened my eyes, I could see fires burning everywhere. But...it was just fire. Standing on a stage in front of people to play music was much more terrifying. I might burn up at the roaring flames today...but that will only happen after I've done everything I can. I ran toward the railing and leaned over, spotting Lara, and screamed.

"Lara-san!"

"What's wrong, Yoshi?"

"There's a *fire*! A *fire* is spreading!"

Lara was bewildered but quickly heard the sparks behind her. The fire had run up the large mast of the ship. And this flame reached Lara's eyes, too.

“...Everyone, listening! We have to get away as quickly as possible! Don’t panic! I’ll give you the orders! Just do as I say, and you’ll be fine! JF, look for a fire extinguisher!”

I can only leave it to Lara now. Because I had bigger problems on my hands.

“Boo-san!”

“...I...”

Her eyes devoid of emotion reflected the flames ahead of her. The flames continue to swallow everything around it. It’s like...the hatred was spreading. At this rate, we’ll all burn up. I went down on one knee, placing my hand on Boudicia’s shoulder, as I called out to her.

“Boo-san, the past won’t change. Hurting others, being hurt in return, the past won’t come back. However...”

I heard a roaring noise nearby, telling me that the fire was spreading. I stood in front of Boudicia, gently embracing her as I whispered into her ear.

“...And because we can’t get this time back, we change. We have no other choice but to change. You changed, too. And I know that more than anybody else.”

Right now, I still don’t have the answer. But, I know the question I have to ask myself...To look for a method that hurts nobody else. One day, surely...

“If we can’t turn back, then let’s move forward. Let’s live on. Carry our sins, and then...change again once tomorrow comes!”

I felt something warm on my back. But, it wasn’t the fire. The warmth belonged to Boudicia’s arms. She tightly embraced me for a moment, and then quickly let go again. That was all I needed to know.

“...Got it,” she spoke calmly, but with determination. “But, I don’t wanna be alone.”

“Boo-san...”

“You’ll come with me. Right, Yoshi?”

I moved away and stood up.

“Yes, of course.” Boudicia grabbed the hand I offered her. “Let’s go, we have to save Gabriel-san.”

“Yeah...!”

As we held hands, we stormed inside the fire.

“Raaaaaah!”

Through the wall of fire, we reached Gabriel’s location.

“Stand up, Gabriel!”

He held his knees like a child sitting in the corner of the room.

“It’s okay...I’ll go meet *Grandma* now...”

“Stop acting like an idiot!” Boudicia roared as she grabbed his collar.

However, he just averted his face, devoid of strength.

“I knew...That this won’t solve anything...But even so...I can’t get rid of this anger and fury...I can’t change...That’s why...I just want to burn up and be free.”

“Careful!”

I heard the sound of something breaking, as a burning mast came crashing down. I quickly got between the two.

“Gah...Hot...!”

Despite wearing a thick coat, the heat still continued to swallow us. The red light around us illuminated the black smoke as it disappeared into the night sky.

“...I know she won’t return no matter how much I apologize. But

even so, I'm sorry. It's my fault. I was the one who killed your grandma!"

"...Ghost...you are..."

"You can do as you want to me later. But, we'll do that after we get out of here! After we get out of this alive!" She screamed as she turned Gabriel's head to face her. "I'll save you. I'll get out of here alive. I know it won't account for much, but if you die...then your grandma in heaven will cry!"

Gabriel looked at Boudicia and then sighed.

"The Ghost...is talking about heaven, huh?" His voice was still shaking, but he had calmed down quite a bit.

"No. I'm talking about your grandma." She looked at Gabriel. "You are right. When I wrote on your grandma's store, I didn't consider her feelings in the slightest. I just wanted to ruin everything. I was wrong...and I'm probably still wrong even now."

"Of course. What you're doing is *wrong*."

"I know that very well. I don't think I'm in the right, either. But...it was your grandma who told me not to quit or run away."

I could see Gabriel's eyes opening wide. Boudicia continued.

"The store is gone. Your grandmother is dead. That makes me sad, too. But, I've watched this whole time...how the city changes. Every graffiti eventually disappears. And so will we. We'll die eventually. So quickly, even."

Her voice was calm, but it packed definitive passion.

"Sure, I might be wrong. But, even if I end up hurting others...It's all I can do. It's what it means to be alive."

Her words shone brightly despite the fire all around us. Strong enough to not lose against it.

"I won't run away. I'll fight until the very end. No matter what

happens, I'll accept it. Until the day I die, I keep moving. So, Gabriel..." She rammed her head into Gabriel's forehead. "You don't run, either. Fight until the very end."

Like a glass had toppled over, tears came streaming down from Gabriel's eyes. He closed them for a moment and then smiled as he muttered.

"Not bad."

Gabriel removed Boudicia's hands and slowly stood up. However, he immediately sunk down again. His consciousness was slowly fading. We have to hurry. Boudicia tried to support Gabriel by offering him a shoulder, as I looked around. The fire was spreading. We won't be able to make it out anymore. I tried to keep it down with my coat, but the fire swallowed it whole right after.

I could hear distant screams and roars. Did the citizens manage to make it to safety? I just hope Lara and the others are okay. I still can't hear any sirens in the distance, meaning the firefighters won't make it in time. There was no option left to get out of this fiery hell alive. The wooden boat had begun to lose its shape as everything was burned to cinders. In a few more moments, we'll be swallowed by the flames. And...we were powerless against this.



“Hey, Yoshi.”

Amidst this scorching heat, Boudicia’s skin shone in a crimson red. Even though we were about to meet our end, I couldn’t help but think...how beautiful she was.

“We didn’t make it in time for Christmas, but...”

“Boo-san!”

She began coughing aggressively. I tried to help her carry Gabriel’s body, but he felt heavy and lumpy.

“If...if we make it out of this alive...There’s something I wanna do with you.”

“Stop talking! You’ll breathe in the smoke!”

“I can only say it now!”

More of the ship collapsed amidst the flames. And yet, her eyes shone brightly.

“I want us to...!”

Her lips, quivering in fear and exhaustion, moved, but before she could finish her words—We heard a noise resembling spray paint being sprayed on a wall, as our view turned white.

“Okay, that’s enough!”

Despite the situation we were in, that voice cut through all despair. And the silhouette who appeared beyond the white smoke belonged to—

“Nelina-san!”

A fairy holding a fire extinguisher.

“Seriously...You’re completely helpless without Nelina, not to mention flirting like this when she’s not around! She knew something was off...But, her timing never fails, right?” She removed the cloth around her mouth and grinned arrogantly.

“Nelina-san...Why are you here?! It’s dangerous!”

“Huuuh? Dangerous? You’re asking that now? Sometimes, you can be such a dummy, Yoshi,” she sighed at me in disbelief. “Nelina came here to save you!”

“Nelina-san...”

“If that poor kitty burned up here...Then you’ll probably blame yourself forever, and stop playing the guitar for good. And then you’ll never belong to Nelina!”

Despite the situation, Nelina was Nelina. She reaches for everything she wants, no matter the situation. Even if it’s inside a sea of flames.

“Over here!”

Nelina pressed the handle of the fire extinguisher again, and the flames around us disappeared. Even if she couldn’t clear it all, she made a path for us.

“To think the fox would come to save us...Let’s go, Yoshi!”

“Boo-san.”

“What now?! Let’s get out of here before...”

“Let’s do it.”

“Huh?”

“What you just said.”

“But, I didn’t even finish what...”

“No matter what it is...if it’s with you, I’d love to do it, Boo-san.”

That’s right. We only have right now, always limited by choices. Once we let it slip past us, the chance might never come again. Whether we are on a burning boat... in front of a brick wall...maybe even up on the stage of a live concert...whatever place it would be— We always only have one moment.



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Epilogue: “Future Proof”

The Christmas Wars ended in a draw. Or more accurately, it wasn't counted. As one of the ships burned down as a result of the battle of graffiti versus music, it ended up on the news. Gabriel turned himself in to the police, confessing he was the one who started the fire. However, because the boat was supposed to be abandoned anyway and just burned on the sea, plus nobody was severely hurt, the charges were light. Additionally, there were rumors that the city council covered for him because he's such a crucial musician conveying the culture of Bristol.

The citizens, who supported Gabriel's opinion of removing all graffiti, were bewildered at this result. Seeing that opposition against graffiti reached even such aggressive levels was shocking. And finally, Gabriel published a post on his social media.

Let me start with my conclusion. *I was wrong.* That Christmas night, I saw the graffiti being written. And I thought...it was beautiful. No, I was reminded how beautiful it could be. Not from an artistic standpoint. The soul it contained... made me think it was breathtaking. And yet, I burned it all down because of my personal feelings. It was turned to ash...to dust. I wanted to burn down the boat and then die with it. However, the person who saved me was a graffiti writer. And it was none other than the [Ghost of Bristol]. Undoubtedly, writing on random walls owned by people is a crime. My thoughts have not changed. It's impossible to say that all graffiti is *right*. But it's equally impossible to call all graffiti *wrong*. Thus, we have to continue to ask ourselves...And work toward the future of the city that is waiting ahead of us.

Reading this message, many of the citizens stopped speaking against graffiti. Then again, there couldn't have been too many either way. But when you're given a reason, it's easier to take one side. And that

is a terrifying thought. Crazy enough, Gabriel's grandma who owned the music store was actually friends with Radesh. She apparently knew that she didn't have much more time to live. Apparently, she asked him for advice and if she should let someone inherit the store, but she decided to close it completely in the end. And that was already a decision she made before Boudicia started writing on it. In other words, Boudicia's actions had no influence on the store. But that brought up the question of why Gabriel's grandmother kept this a secret. When I voiced that question, Radesh gave me one possible hypothesis.

"I own a store, too, so I can kind of understand. She probably couldn't tell her grandson who loved music so much that she'd have to close up shop because she was sick. It takes a lot of courage to make this decision."

Another reason for the resistance toward graffiti slowly disappearing was Lara's work. One of the people present at the scene took a video of what happened. Many of the citizens saw the leader of Queen Bear's Revenge as a hero who protects the people, and this spread all over the internet. Gabriel's post put even more attention to this incident, so she practically became famous overnight as the beryl green maiden, acting as the hero of Bristol. Queen Bear's Revenge quickly recovered its popularity, too, and JF was allowed back inside the crew.

Gabriel obviously took time off his work, so JF spent his time working on his graffiti or starting a solo career. He wanted to put more effort into his music, except none of his songs needed any guitar parts, so I was out of the picture. At the same time, Nelina decided to head back to Japan. According to her, she was really pushing the limits with her producer just to come to Japan, forcefully taking time off her work. And for that reason, I felt extremely apologetic. That being said, she would take a quick detour and visit Paris on the way home. Yet again, very much like Nelina. So, Boudicia and I saw her off to Bristol Airport.

"Be careful, Nelina-san."

"Hmph, just hope the plane doesn't crash."

Nelina actually carried her large suitcase here all by herself. She probably realized that she really acted spoiled. But the fact she could just bring that here without any issues makes me wonder how much physical strength she has.

“If the plane really were to crash, then Yoshi would come swimming to save me, right? Nelina saved his life, after all.”

“...I am aware that I owe you a lot.”

She saved me inside a sea of flames, so she will make me swim through a storm at sea if need be.

“Aaaah, this feels great! Now you have to listen to all of Nelina’s orders, right? Aw man, what should she make you do next!”

“Hey, Yoshi isn’t your damn toy!” Boudicia leaped at Nelina, but she easily evaded that.

“Did you know? In Japanese, you call that toasted rice cakes.”

“Huh? That makes no sense. I’m just saying you shouldn’t push around other people to make them do as you...”

“Ah, right, right. So sorry, little Poor Kitty. Nelina feels bad for Yoshi.”

“Shut up! I don’t wanna hear that from you of all people!”

Nelina took a deep breath and then stood in front of me. How long has it been since she faced me like this? When we make music together, she always stands by my side.

“...Yoshi. Nelina’s gonna wait for you. And she’ll convince everyone.”

“I’m sorry for being selfish. But...right now, I need it.”

Nelina invited me to head home together with her, but I decided to stay in Bristol. One big reason was of course that I still had my university classes here.

“But instead, you’ll get super-duper good at playing the guitar, or

you're out. Got it?"

"I-I'll do my best."

There were still things I needed to find out here. Sights I needed to witness. And surely, this will positively impact my own music. And when I told Nelina that, she said she'd wait for me. I feared she would try to threaten me to force me home. And I bet she would've been able to do so, too. She even came to the UK just for me. However, she didn't. If so, I want to respond to her expectations. She gently tapped my shoulder and then moved on to Boudicia.

"Boudicia." She called her name.

"Huh? How do you..."

"I'll leave the Yoshi *babysitting* to you."

"Heh. *I will make him a man*, Nelina."

"*Make him a man?* I didn't know you were such a horny lion!"

"Th-That's not what I meant!"

After they engaged in a conversation that could easily invite a headache, Nelina opened both her arms, looking at us. She then pushed her left hand toward Boudicia. She gazed at this in confusion for a moment, but eventually pulled her own left hand out of her pocket, taking Nelina's. Then, they stared at each other, until Nelina let go and grabbed her suitcase.

"Heh, okay. It's time for Nelina to go! Make sure to stay in contact!" She said and walked away, as the suitcase created a loud rattling sound.

We continued to stand still and watched her walk off for a while.

"And there she goes...as quickly as she came."

"Tell me about it. But, she was pretty interesting, I gotta admit."

I knew that this was Boudicia's way of offering praise.

“In the end, we couldn’t even enjoy Christmas in the slightest.”

“...Yeah, true.”

“By the way, what is it that you wanted to do, Boo-san?”

“Huh?”

“On that boat, remember? You wanted to do something with me. I wanted to bring it up this whole time, but...What was that about?”

“That’s...Um...Saying it right now is pretty embarrassing...”

Is it something embarrassing to say? I subconsciously tensed up. I slightly regretted agreeing without thinking much, even considering the situation.

“...Pie.”

“Huh?”

“...I wanted you to bake me a pie.”

“What do you mean?” I was bewildered and returned a question.

“You can bake pies, right? You mentioned that before.”

A distant memory flashed up in my mind. I think it was on the day we first found graffiti written on the window of the 8-Bit World. That was the first day I saw graffiti. And I mentioned that I was a relatively good cook. I mean, I could bake a pie...But, why?

“On Christmas, I’ve always been alone, so...I never got to eat pie with someone. That’s all.” She hid her face with her cap.

However, she couldn’t cover up the fact that she was blushing beneath there. But...that’s what it was? That’s a bit...of a let-down... Though, actually. To her, it’s probably that big of a deal. Sitting together with a family, eating pie together. And as my thoughts carried me that far, I stopped that thought. A family? I don’t know how Boudicia feels about this...But if it’s for her sake, I don’t mind baking a pie.

“Okay. *While the iron is hot*, as they say. Let’s do it right now.”

“...You’ll make one for me?”

“From zero is a bit tough, even for me. If we can use a pre-made dough, I should be able to do it.”

“That’s good! I don’t really get it, but that’s good enough!” Boudicia jumped for joy, almost like a small child excited for their present.

“The shared kitchen at the dorm has a spacey oven, too. Let’s buy the ingredients on the way back.”

“Yay! Ah, but...if possible, I’d like a chicken mushroom pie! Or, an apple pie would be good, too...”

“We can make both.”

“*Really?* Like, for real?”

“*Really.* Just leave it to me.”

“Woooo! This is like a *celebration!*”

“Which fits just fine, because we’re here to celebrate Christmas... Although a bit delayed.”

“Now I’m hungry!”

“It won’t be done that quick, you know?”

“Sure, sure! Let’s go!”

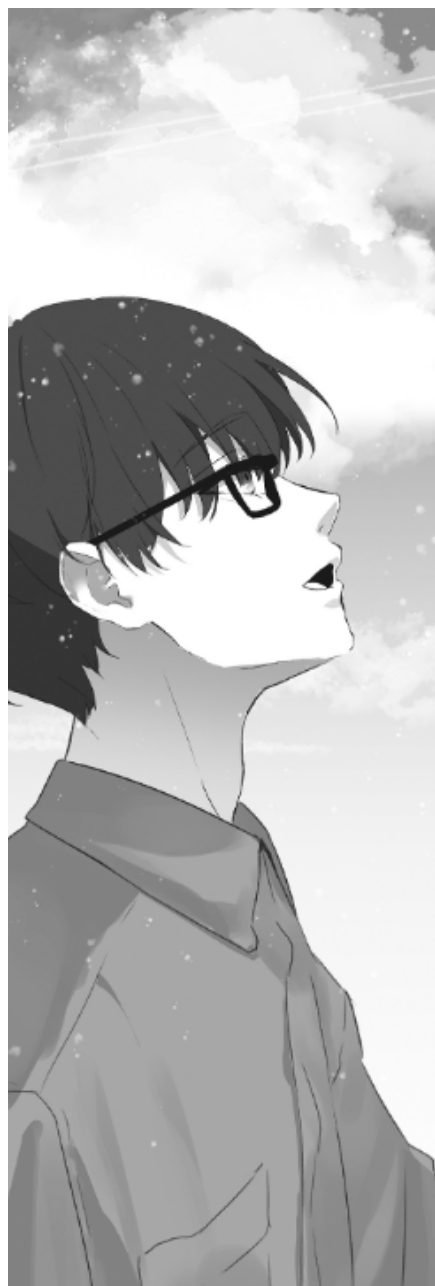
Boudicia took my hand and started running. It happened so naturally, it was like we’d always done this. And it left me speechless.

“Ah...”

The moment we stepped out of the airport, Boudicia raised her voice in surprise, as she looked up at the sky. I did so, too. One of the white objects that gently fluttered down from the sky landed on Boudicia’s long eyelashes.

“Snow, huh? What a rare sight.”

“Yeah...”





Without saying another word, we left the airport after us, worrying that these feelings inside of me might melt away like the snow...that I have to let go of her hand. And after we finished our shopping trip,

we made the pie at the dorm. At first, I thought Boudicia might be able to help me, but I quickly realized she wouldn't offer any strategic value, so it was mostly just me doing all the work while she sat next to me drawing in her sketchbook. And after I placed the pie in the heated oven at 200°C, it was waiting time.

I sat next to Boudicia, watching the snow fall outside the window. Bristol definitely isn't a place known for its snow. I heard that it was a rarity to see snow in general. Maybe this might be some record level, even. But whenever something happens, you begin calling it destiny, as the world slowly changes. As we encounter unbelievable coincidences and find the need to fight back, we slowly change. Even if things don't go the way we'd like, even if we can't do what we set out to do, we still change.

I remembered Boudicia's graffiti that was the first victim of [Z]. Is it also being covered by snow right about now? And even if it wasn't... that wall will continue to change. Maybe by the hands of the Ghost, or by someone else entirely. But either way, it definitely won't stay the same way. It will continue to change, surely. And nobody knows how it will end up next time. All we can do is put our souls on the line for even just a single moment. We might not know what's right or wrong, but we have to choose one path.

In a way, we're like the howling fire. That's why...the scent of pie coming from the oven...the color of the pen Boudicia was using to write...her faint sleeping noises as she leaned on me...and even my racing heart as that took me by surprise...Just like Bristol with its now right now, it will one day be overwritten by something else.

OVERWRITE: THE FIRE OF CHRISTMAS WARS

THE END.

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Afterword

Hello everyone, I'm Ikeda Akiya, and I'm the person who wrote this novel. This novel was released in October 2020. Since the first volume came out in April, it's been roughly half a year since the last release. And I think it's fair to say that a lot has happened in this half year. In 2020, the whole world was plagued by a virus, which resulted in Japan issuing a state of emergency, and we were asked to avoid any necessary trips outside our homes. As a result of that, many book stores were closed for the longest time.

The first volume of this series, [Overwrite—The Ghost of Bristol] stood on the bookshelves during this time. And since it was the debut work of a new writer, just having someone look at it was a tough job, truly. However, the people who read it were kind enough to share their wonderful impressions online, spreading the news around the internet. You don't know how much that has saved me. That is why I'd like to thank all those kind people first. Thank you for sharing your impressions and bringing attention to my work. It's all of you who allowed me to bring out this second volume.

Naturally, I received a lot of assistance to release this second volume. My two editors, Mirea-san who provides such wonderful illustrations as always, my designers who helped in deepening the world view of this series, and everyone who helped in distributing this. Additionally, dear graffiti writer CLUM-san, who is active in Japan, greatly helped in teaching me more about graffiti. Of course, the same respect goes to all graffiti writers active in Bristol. In this volume, graffiti and music may have stood on opposite sides, but in Bristol, they share a strong connection.

Of course, I want to offer my love to my wonderful wife and daughter. Compared to the first volume and its retelling of fantasy with my personal experience, this second volume had a bit more fantasy attached to it. However, it is still modeled after Bristol and its

atmosphere. I'd be happy if you grew interested in Bristol as a whole.

It is not up to me to decide if this volume has managed to overwrite the first installment of the series. However, I will do my utmost and devote all of my being to attempting at making it live up to its standard. So let us meet again. On a new wall, with a new painting—

See you later, alligator!

Ikeda Akiya

Author's Comment

ヨシくんの友人である彼女には、日本に帰国してから東京で会いました。僕は学生時代にやっていたバンドでギターボーカルだったのですが、当時も今も歌があまり得意ではないので、彼女の声を聞いて「才能とはこういうことか」と衝撃を受けました。物語の中ではさすがにずいぶん誇張しましたが、不思議な魅力を持った人であることには変わりありません。まるで、目が合っただけで魔法にかかってしまうような。

ネリナ

Nelina

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